

Missouri Youth Write 2023 Silver Key Winners

Missouri Youth Write is sponsored by the Missouri Council of Teachers of English (MoCTE), the Greater Kansas City Writing Project (www.gkcwp.org), and Missouri Writing Projects Network coordinate the Missouri Regions's Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists and Writers (www.artandwriting.org)



The nation's longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens

Ali Abdulsattar

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

No Plans, No Goals

No Plans, No Goals

I heard an ear-piercing voice shouting, "Huddle up!" It was my coach yelling at the top of his lungs. We all circled him like a hoard of birds surrounding a piece of bread. "Listen up, no talking!" We all nod and look at the coach with determined, hungry eyes. "We're not going to let this game slip! Give it all you got!" I took my last sip of blood-red, Fruit Punch Gatorade. *We got this for sure*, I thought, wiping the ring of juice around my lips *We hear the whistle go off, and* we all jump up and gather into a circle that looks like a blob of red-shirted 10-year-olds. We chant, "Gallagher on 3! 1, 2, 3, go Gallagher!" I clasped my hands together and yelled, "Come on boys, we got this!" I ran up into my position, left-wing, blinded by the sun, a huge white star in the sky; I stared at it down. I dug holes in the thick, fuzzy grass with my dirt-covered soccer cleats as I anxiously waited for the whistle to blow. There was a sudden sharp sound, resembling a screeching teapot boiling on the stove. That whistle sent our mix of red and blue uniforms flying, like a high-speed police chase. I sprinted down the tinted green, white line on my left, and in a raspy voice I yelled, "Pass down the ball!" I quickly got the ball that was passed down the line to me, and I cut through all the blue defenders stacked up trying to protect their goal. I ran so fast and with so much ball control, it left a look of shock on their faces as if they saw a ghost. I chipped the rubbery, leather ball over their heads. Their goalkeeper flew into the sky with his neon goalie set like Green Lantern in Justice League, my face in astonishment like a supervillain when my plan failed. He came down hard, knocking the ball out of the box and playing it out onto the other side of the field. *Shoot, I lost the ball, we can't afford another mistake like this!* I was filled with disappointment as I charged at the ball. It was as if I were a bull seeing the matador waving the red flag into my face vigorously. I quickly snagged the ball but lost it faster than I could blink. I tried chasing down the player who stole the ball, but I was too sluggish after I used all my energy on one play.

The blue striker dribbled through all of us and took a shot more powerful than I thought. Our goalkeeper dove sideways like an Olympic swimmer and made a glorious save. I made my left hand into a fist and threw it up, and yelled, "Yes, Matt!" He held the ball in his left hand with his onyx-black goalie uniform and glowing silver gloves reflecting off the sun. He looked like a superhero, chest up, shoulders broad. He read his right leg to thrust into the ball. The ball flew over all of us. *This is my chance!* I sprinted to the ball trying to keep up. I cut in, wondering why all the defenders were standing around, with devious smirks on their faces. I shook my head, and I took a shot. The leathery ball spun clockwise and zoomed to the back of the net. WHOOSH. *I scored! We are going to win!* Everyone is cheering and calling my name! We all celebrated until I heard another whistle too many. It was offside. I quickly turned my head, seeing the referee with his checkered orange and yellow flag. Bummed, I ran my fingers through my slick black hair in astonishment. After all the running, I was depleted. I felt like a car with an empty tank. I heard the whistle, indicating that we are going into the second half.

We all jogged back to the bench to replenish our thirst. We were parched, especially me. I chugged all my water, listening to my coach comes up with a new plan. I kind of zoned out. The water now tastes vile after I heard my name being whispered around my teammates. Everybody's eyes stared into my soul; I felt a shiver down my spine. I started freaking out: *Were they talking about me? Because I let them down!* I looked down at the mushy, ruffled dying green grass, in disappointment. My knees turned to rubber, *Fine, I'll show them.* I got up quicker than everyone else. While everyone else jogs into their positions, I thought about what I'll do to prove them wrong. I got looks from my teammates and my parents. I felt the adrenaline pumping through my body, TWEET! I sprinted all the way downfield with the ball setting up a beautiful opportunity, and my teammate drove around every defender. He took a powerful shot but missed. *W-what? He had that!* I shook it off, but then I got a chance to score, but instead, I passed back to my teammates letting them take a shot. He attempted to curve it in the goal on the top right. The

blue and white striped ball flew in the sky, and I focused on the ball. DING! It hit the post. I groaned, *Dang it*, I ran my fingers through my tangled black hair and squeezed it in frustration. He seemed more upset than me, so I told him, "It's alright". We ran back preparing for the goal kick, which could go over our heads and drive my coach crazy. I ran back to mark one of the red midfielders, and he pushed me away from him. I pushed back. We heard the ball cracking, and we both focused on the ball flying over in our direction. He gave one final nudge which messed up everything.

I fell forward onto the ground, face-front. I caught myself, but saw the red midfielder driving through the field. I stayed put seeing one of our best defenders, slid into the ball and a midfielder, which caused a full-on collision. *Hah*. He sent the ball flying through the sky toward my direction, and I played it to the side of the field, giving my team another opportunity to lock in the victory. Instead, everything went down wrong. Number #32 ran down the line, snagged the ball from our defender, and sprinted down the field with the ball. He cut through all of us, and there he stood, face-to-face with our goalkeeper. He took a shot. SWOOSH! He scored. 1-0. *We lost, there was no way we could win with such little time*. Everyone argued with each other not knowing who to put blame on because everything happened in a flash. I stared at the scoreboard, and I slowly looked down at my shoes. My shoulders drooped, and my eyes teared up, causing my vision to become blurry. *And it was all my fault*. My coach was furious. He heaved his clipboard directly onto the bench. We managed to get everything together. We played the ball. Passing back and forth, the heavy ball landed at my feet, not knowing what to do. I passed back to the other side of the field praying I wouldn't make the same mistake of letting the other team score. TWEET! I froze. I looked around and saw that everyone was clearing off the field. *That's it...we lost*. I stood in shock staring at my ocean-blue and salmon-orange Nike cleats. I felt like a fish that went astray from my school, shocked, and scared. I walked slowly toward my coach and my team. He put his cold hand on my shoulder. He looked at me and said, "It's okay, it wasn't your fault." I nodded and smiled. I sincerely apologized to my team for letting them down, and for not trying my hardest. They looked at me confusingly and tilted their heads to the left, "What do you mean? We all didn't play our hardest!" I looked up, trying to contemplate what they meant.

I walked slowly to my car, head down, seeing the dead grass, moving with the wind, like it was calling my name, but it seemed to get louder. I heard a familiar voice calling my name, "Ali... Ali..." I spun back around and saw my coach gesturing for me to come back. I jogged to my coach and he said, "Hey, pick your head up, we'll win soon, I promise." I smiled and nodded. "How 'bout you bring it down?" he said. We all gathered up and I put my fist in the middle of the circle, and it piled up quickly like my laundry basket at the end of the week, I look around at my teammates, sweat dripping from their faces, desperately panting to find the rhythm of the heart-beating, patiently waiting for me to bring it down. *Come on Ali*, I thought, *You got this*, with no energy. as if I took my basket down the stairs, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, yelling with all my might, "GALLAGHER ON 3,"

"1, 2, 3 GO, GALLAGHER!" we all hollered as we brought our fists up in unison.

Quincy Alberhasky

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Central High School, Springfield, MO

Educator: Jodi Pitts

Category: Dramatic Script

Say Something

INT. CAFE

OLIVIA, a young barista, stands behind a cash register. CAFE MAN walks to the counter to order.

OLIVIA:

Hi, what can I get you?

CAFE MAN:

Just a small black coffee, please.

OLIVIA punches numbers into the register.

OLIVIA:

\$2.45, please.

CAFE MAN hands her the money and OLIVIA hands back the change.

CAFE MAN:

That's a cute pin, by the way.

CAFE MAN points to a cat pin on OLIVIA's apron. Olivia looks down at it.

OLIVIA:

Oh, thanks. My mom bought it for me.

CAFE MAN:

It makes your eyes pop.

OLIVIA laughs and smiles awkwardly.

OLIVIA:

Oh, um, thanks.

CAFE MAN:

I don't mean to seem too forward, but you're super pretty. Would you want to grab some coffee with me, maybe tomorrow?

OLIVIA becomes uncomfortable, hesitating to speak.

OLIVIA:

Oh... no, no, I'm sorry.

CAFE MAN:

What? You've got a boyfriend or something?

OLIVIA:

No I—

CAFE MAN:

So? You think I'm ugly?

OLIVIA:

No! I just can't, I'm sorry.

CAFE MAN:

Come on. Just give it a chance.

OLIVIA:

Please, I really just can't.

CAFE MAN:

Let's just try it out, it'll be fun.

CAFE MAN places his hand on the counter. OLIVIA looks down at it.

Beat.

OLIVIA:

Okay.

The man smiles.

INT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM

OLIVIA and her MOM, ANN, sit on a couch, eating their dinner while watching a movie. The two sit in silence for a moment eating.

ANN:

So, how was the first day at the new school?

OLIVIA:

Fine.

ANN:

Did you meet new people?

OLIVIA:

Mhm.

Beat.

ANN:

Any of your classes interesting?

OLIVIA shrugs.

Beat.

ANN:

Olivia, please. You're going to have to say something at some point. I don't know how much longer we can keep

going like this.

OLIVIA (frustrated):
Mom.

ANN:
I know it's been really difficult for you to adjust, but you have to talk to me. You've hardly spoken since...

ANN sighs. OLIVIA stops eating to look at ANN

Beat.

OLIVIA:
I have to get ready for bed.

OLIVIA walks into another room.

ANN:
Honey...

INT. APARTMENT BATHROOM

OLIVIA pumps facial cleanser into her hands. She scrubs it on her face whilst staring at herself in the mirror. She hears the voice of her mother in her head.

ANN (V.O.):
Why didn't you say something?!

Olivia scrubs her face harder.

ANN (V.O.):
Oh, my poor baby.

ANN (V.O.):
Why didn't you tell me?

OLIVIA throws her head down toward the sink to splash it with water. OLIVIA stares at herself in the mirror, water dripping from her face.

INT. APARTMENT BEDROOM - NIGHT

OLIVIA climbs into her bed. She tries to fall asleep but is disrupted by a woman shouting outside her window on the streets. OLIVIA gets out of bed and opens her window to look out. The woman is physically fighting with a man.

WOMAN:
Please! Get away from me! Somebody, help!

Olivia begins breathing heavily. She shuts the window and gets back into bed.

INT. APARTMENT BEDROOM - MORNING

OLIVIA opens up her closet to grab an outfit, a mini skirt, and t-shirt. She admires it for a moment. She switches to sweatpants.

EXT. STREETS OF NEW YORK

A street of apartments. OLIVIA walks down the sidewalk. A MAN sits on the stairs of an apartment complex. He whistles at OLIVIA. She ignores it.

MAN:
You're beautiful, sweetheart.

Beat.

MAN:
Come on, what are you running for?

OLIVIA speeds up.

INT. SUBWAY STATION

A crowded platform waiting for a subway. OLIVIA walks to her station. She notices a CHILD has dropped a toy while walking with her MOTHER, who is wearing a blue coat. OLIVIA bends over to retrieve it. She runs after the two.

OLIVIA:
Hey! Ma'am! In the blue coat!

The MOTHER turns around to look at OLIVIA. OLIVIA runs up to her.

OLIVIA:
Your kid dropped this.

OLIVIA hands her the toy.

MOTHER:
Oh! Thank you.

OLIVIA smiles at her. The MOTHER walks away. OLIVIA turns around to look for her station. A MAN walks past her, slapping her bottom.

MAN:
Nice ass.

OLIVIA gasps, turning around. The subway arrives. People crowd together to enter the subway, blocking OLIVIA's view. The man is gone.

INT. CLASSROOM

A small, cramped classroom. A board displays the stone head of Medusa. OLIVIA sits at a desk. In front of her, two boys. Students have textbooks laying open on their desks. The male teacher, Mr. Weber, is lecturing.

TEACHER:
Okay, last week we covered book 3 of Ovid's Metamorphoses. Now, we begin book 4. Tyler, would you please read the third paragraph of this chapter?

A boy, TYLER, is in front of and to the left of OLIVIA. He begins to read.

TYLER:
Perseus is a greek hero best known for killing great monsters. In one triumph, Perseus slayed the Gorgon Medusa. The Gorgo was cursed with a head full of snakes by the goddess Athena for having laid with the god Poseidon in her place of worship. Sent by the king and with the help of Athena, Perseus beheaded the...

OLIVIA stares at TYLER. She frowns. The sound of TYLER begins to fade. OLIVIA begins to hear voices from the days before. The voices begin spaced apart and quiet, but quickly start to happen in rapid succession, becoming louder.

ANN (V.O.):
Oh, my poor baby.

CAFE MAN (V.O.):
Let's just try it out, it'll be fun.

MAN (V.O.):
What are you running for?

ANN (V.O.):
You have to talk to me.

WOMAN (V.O.):
Get away from me!

ANN (V.O.):
Why didn't you say something?!

CAFE MAN (V.O.):
Just give it a chance.

WOMAN (V.O.):
Somebody, help!

ANN (V.O.):
Why didn't you say something?!

OLIVIA stands up at her desk.

Beat.

TEACHER:
Do you need something, Olivia?

OLIVIA:
Sorry.. No, sorry.

Olivia slowly sits back down.

TYLER looks at OLIVIA and then at the boy next to him, FLYNN. They whisper to each other.

TYLER:
She's so weird.

FLYNN:
Still hot, though.

The two snicker.

EXT. SCHOOLYARD

A school in the middle of the city. OLIVIA walks out of the entrance onto the street wearing a backpack. A tone from her phone indicates a text. She takes it out.

CAFE MAN (TEXT):
We good for 8?

OLIVIA lets her head fall back. She sighs.

OLIVIA:
Fuck.

INT. SUBWAY STATION

People squeeze into the train cars. OLIVIA is on the platform, trying to catch up with the crowd. OLIVIA rushes to get into the subway before the doors close. She barely makes it through. She takes a seat next to a man, SAM. She pulls out a pair of earbuds, connecting them to her phone. She listens to Louis Armstrong.

SAM:
That was a close one.

OLIVIA turns to look at him. She pulls out an earbud.

OLIVIA:
Hm?

SAM:
The doors.

OLIVIA:
Oh, yeah.

Beat.

SAM:
What are you listening to?

OLIVIA:
Oh, um, "Everybody Loves My Baby."

SAM:
Ohhh.

SAM (SINGING):
Everybody loves my baby, but my baby don't love nobody but me.

OLIVIA laughs.

OLIVIA:
You know this song?

SAM:
Hell yeah, I love Louis.

OLIVIA:
I don't know anyone else who listens to him.

SAM:
Well, you aren't hanging with the right people.

OLIVIA and SAM smile.

EXT. SUBWAY STATION

The doors to the subway open. OLIVIA exits. She walks up a pair of stairs from the platform to a higher level. SAM chases behind her. He grabs her forearm. She turns around.

SAM:
Hey, I forgot to ask on the subway, but could I get your number?

OLIVIA:
I'm sorry if I misled you, but I'm not really interested.

OLIVIA tries to turn around. SAM stops her, grabbing her wrist, hard.

SAM:
Wait, hold on. Just give me a chance.

OLIVIA stares at her wrist. The voices appear again.

CAFE MAN (V.O.):
Just give it a chance.

MAN (V.O.):
What are you running for?

SAM (CONT'D):
I'm a great guy, I promise.

OLIVIA:
No, please I don't want to.

ANN (V.O.):
Why didn't you say something?!

SAM:
I just think you're so pretty.

WOMAN (V.O.):
Somebody, help!

OLIVIA breaks from his grip. She starts walking away, quickly. The voices become louder.

MAN (V.O.):
Sweetheart.

ANN (V.O.):
Oh, my poor baby.

CAFE MAN (V.O.):
Let's just try it out it'll be fun.

ANN (V.O.):
Why didn't you tell me?

WOMAN (V.O.):
Get away from me!

SAM catches up to her. He grabs her wrist

ANN (V.O):
Why didn't you say anything?!

OLIVIA whips around, shoving SAM.

OLIVIA:
Get your fucking hands off of me!

SAM:
Yo, chill!

SAM backs away. OLIVIA walks toward him, shoving him again.

OLIVIA:
Don't touch me! You like being touched?!

OLIVIA takes her backpack off, swinging it at SAM.

SAM:
Holy shit, you're a fucking psycho.

OLIVIA:
I'm the psycho? Leave me alone!

OLIVIA swings her backpack at him quickly, knocking him to the ground.

OLIVIA:
Don't ever touch me! Ever fucking again!

SAM looks up at her, horrified. OLIVIA is panting. She looks up, seeing the crowd of people staring at her. She looks around. Everyone is in shock. Slowly, Olivia places her backpack on. She breathes a sigh of relief She walks away. She smiles.

THE END.

Maya Angia

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Francis Howell High School, Saint Charles, MO

Educator: Sean Wheeler

Category: Poetry

Atlas

Atlas watches in quiet disbelief
As I slip the sky
Off his aching shoulders,
Balancing its punishing weight
With practiced ease.
“Rest,” I tell him,
“This is nothing new for me.”
The titan stands up straight,
The lightest he’s been in an eternity,
But he doesn’t smile.
“What is it?” I ask,
“You seem troubled for one
Who has just been relieved
Of his greatest burden.”
“Perhaps,” he frowns,
“I would expect such strength
From a god,”
His voice devastatingly gentle
And far too understanding,
“But why is it, dear child,
That you were forced to know this torment?
Why were you allowed to carry the weight
Of the world?”

Maya Angia

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Francis Howell High School, Saint Charles, MO

Educator: Sean Wheeler

Category: Poetry

School

I heard the phrase “it looks good on college applications” 11 times today.

Why are we forced to do so many things that make us unhappy?

Because colleges like when we run ourselves ragged

and fight every day through our self-made monotony?

Because colleges want us to give up our childhood,

time, peace

sanity

for them?

Because we’re not good enough.

Teachers tell me they’re preparing me for “real life” as if the first 18 years are just a free trial.

When I get thrown into the world that they call harsh and unforgiving, will I want to

crawl

back to school?

Will I think of it as the haven, the protection that teachers proclaimed?

Will the evils out there be scarier and more painful than the ones I experience

every

day

in the classroom?

I think I won’t notice a difference.

Getting an education turned out to be a competition I never agreed to enter.

Is every day supposed to feel like a war, full of vicious violence and unending fear?

Am I supposed to be constantly terrified of falling behind

in any aspect of life

because it will spell out my failure?

Why am I stuck in this perpetual cycle filled with millions of

children

all scrambling for a chance to stay on top?

Some days, it feels like school isn’t for learning, only winning.

I used to think in weekdays, and now I think in test dates.

Does it even matter that the days fall apart, dissolving into a dreary hum,

punctuated

only by the occasional assessment of my competence?

Is it sad that my life is defined by due dates and deadlines that announce

another chance for me to fail which the teachers call

“opportunities to demonstrate your worth”?

What will happen when I no longer have tests to determine my time, my life, my worth?

Maybe then I won’t *have* to be worth anything.

The only things heavier than this backpack are my eyelids.

Why is it assumed that my eyelids drooping is a sign of my inattention or ignorance or lack of care

that needs to be fixed and not

my brain

falling

falling

falling
into disrepair?
Why should I be allowed to only get 4 hours of sleep
every
night
after school and homework and all those things that look good on college applications
have eaten my time, my sleep, my rest?
Because school and learning and education and success are all the most important things in life?
The most tiring thing is surviving in a school that doesn't want me to.
I'm losing sleep, losing peace, losing my mind.
Am I repeating myself?
Do I have to say it
over and
over and
over again
like the teachers because I'm too busy or too tired or too flippant or too dumb to have heard it the first
time?
Would you like me to say it one more time with that sickeningly sweet, derogatory tone?
Clearly I'm not being heard, but it's okay, I'll wait.
Dreams have become extracurriculars that I don't have time for.
Even when I've done everything I "have" to do, why can't I do what I want to do?
What is so wrong with me closing my eyes and floating away
smiling, laughing,
being
happy?
Is it really such a mystery that with dreams so
vivid I can almost taste them
and an imaginary life behind my eyelids so
beautiful it's blinding
that I don't want to wake up anymore?
Maybe it's better that I can't sleep because it hurts so much more to stop dreaming.
Even as I write this, I know that nothing I have to say matters unless it's written in Times New Roman 12pt font.
How is it fair that I can perfectly articulate my thoughts, but have them be disregarded because my
MLA heading is
missing?
For all that school teaches us, why can't they teach us to be happy or just
exist
without hurting all the time, every time?
Why can't they teach us to say
it's okay
not to be perfect?
it's okay
not to be happy?
it's okay
not to be okay?
Oh, sorry, let me make that matter.
I'm not okay.

*the last line is supposed to be in Times New Roman font to fit the last stanza's critique, but the submission software doesn't allow for font changes.

Maya Angia

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Francis Howell High School, Saint Charles, MO

Educator: Sean Wheeler

Category: Poetry

A Void In Evitability (Avoid Inevitability)

I am at the end of everyone, everything.
Backwards. Twisted.
I am eternally waiting for the earth
And its people
To pass me by in their endeavors to matter,
Knowing I will be the ruin of all their plans.
I will take their hopes, their dreams, their lives
And squeeze
Until the tears drip, wringing out the sadness they secret(e).
I wring them out so they don't die
As the lungs of their success
Try to expel their sorrows with every wet
cough
cough.
Drowning on dry land.
Backwards. Twisted
I exist to turn off the lights, hang up the call, lock the doors.
I sound like the tripped breaker, the jarring dial tone, the clicking pins.
I look like the dark hallways, the red buttons, the stiff handles.
But I end the things that must be ended before they continue so long that time has no more room and must squish and
pull and wrench all of us from its stream to make space for all the
endless silence
And endless thoughts.
Backwards. twisted
I am everything wrong in the world.
I am the wounds leaking slow red, the vibrant, visceral visual of vitality
dripping
running
escaping from mortal containers.
I am the small pebble that worms its way into a tightly laced shoe,
rounded and smoothed,
yet impossibly jagged in the sole of a soft foot.
I make life harder to build character.
Like that common excuse made to ward off excuses,
I, too, create hardship to ward off hardship.
Backwards, twisted
I do what no one else can do. I am what no one else can be.
I take the disparaged mantle of entropy
To balance life.
I am unique in my destruction.
I cannot be fabricated, copied,
Replaced.
None have tried;

None will try.
Because for all that I provide, protect, serve,
I am still wrong.
Do not mistake my actions
For heroism.
Heroes save because they cannot bear
To see others hurting.
I save by making others hurt.
I do this, be this, so no one else has to:
backwards, twisted
Worse than trying to imitate me
Is to be forced into it.
To be stretched and pulled and torn
Into inevitability
When your entire existence
Should have been evitable.
I am what no one else should be:
backwards twisted
I am the end of everyone, everything:
backwardstwisted
At the end of the **m** is **me**.

Avi Becker

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Short Story

A Giant, a Cripple, and Their Boxes

A Giant, a Cripple, and Their Boxes

He had expected more from the last years of his life than half-filled boxes and the overpowering smell of harsh detergent. This new apartment was modern to an extent but minimal. Two years was all it for his daughter to move him to an assisted living home from his apartment that he had lived alone in for a decade. His movements had grown far more deliberate after a lengthy surgery for a broken hip, his once determined step, once slow with age but unyielding, now uncertain and off-balance. His family remembered him as a giant, an Ozymandias of age and wisdom; now he was more like Atlas, tricked into imprisonment by a younger hero and forced to watch the world around him as a spectator.

He as a father was remembered his children as an unshakeable man, stubborn enough to never take no for an answer. For seven decades, he had driven himself, worked, raised his grandchildren. He worked without complaint and loved unconditionally. When he immigrated after the rest of his family left home, he continued to work. He was unstoppable.

Now he stands with a walker, amongst the remains of his life. His previous apartment had been sparse but comfortable; his new apartment in the home was new and sterile, and it had taken less than an hour to move his near century of memories. He stared at his shelf of photos, his eyes unfocused but searching for the outlines of the faces.

“Leo called from home last night Papa,” Lily said, snapping him out of his dissociation.

“Huh...what?”

“Leo called from home last night,” Lily repeated.

“Oh—what did he say?”

“He’s...concerned for you papa.”

“Why would he be, I’m safe and sound here,” he replied.

Lily knew her father well enough to know the biting sarcasm that he affected when he was frustrated. As her father began to move, he heard the noise that slashed through the sheets of silence that blanketed the unfamiliar, sterilized apartment. The sound was strangled, barely held together by a cough from the back of the throat, but the old man could recognize the sound of his own child’s tears. Lily remembered her father, the volleyball player, the swimmer, the man who has spent the better part of the 20th century working with his hands. And now he moved like a decrepit turtle, his steps staggering and slow.

He tried to turn around, in awkward fashion of shuffling his feet, but was hindered by the boxes around him. The collection of his nine decades, strewn across the apartment, created a maze around him, and Lily was out of reach.

“I’m not dead yet Lilyachka,” the old man grumbled.

“Papa!” Lily said, exasperated.

Lily shook her head and wiped away her tears as she gingerly towards the boxes. The cardboard containers of living memory seemed only to block her way. Lily stumbled through the puddles of collected life on the floors and with a grimace, and lightly stubbed her toe on the corner of a cabinet, obscured by the soft edges of cardboard. She looked down at the glass cabinet, the one that once stood on the largest wall of his old apartment. The cabinet that contained the dozens of family photos...his wife, his children, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren. The photos that were once proudly displayed in rows of frames, now stacked loosely and obscured by the other detritus of life. As Lily focused in on some of her old favorites, the photos of her mother and father together, her daughter and grandchildren, she registered that he had shuffled onto the couch and sat down.

The old man loved his daughter, but she had inherited every bit of his stubbornness. He loved her for it, as it was her greatest tool, both for and against him. He had been in no position to argue with the move in his

hospitalization, but she was unrelenting in his insistence to hold on to the few things he still had in his control; his car was sold, and now they controlled his bank account. So this was to be his fate...he'd sit on his couch and watch cheesy '80s Soviet version of American Idol. He'd be no better than the fat Americans he often ridiculed to his daughter. His eyes searched the black crystalline mirror of his tomb and his fading eyesight barely honed in on his outline. Had he really become that shrunken man? When had he become so stooped? Was he always this tired, or was this just the exertion? That thought gave him a shock. Exertion? He had walked from one end of the apartment and sat down.

"Lily...move the cabinet to the bedroom," he said.

"Papa, I thought we'd move the photos to the wall—so you can look at them when you want to."

"I can't see them well anyway," her father replied curtly.

"No, we can't just store these in the bedroom,"

The old man knew that Lily realized the reality as well. He was at a point that it was more practical for him to sleep on the couch than to move to the bedroom. He turned his head to face her as he pulled himself up from his slouch. He studied his daughter's face. It was lined with the stress of two worrying years and yet she kept on pushing. It was maddening. He grasped the edge of the tissue box at the end of the couch as he gingerly removed a tissue and coughed into it. It wasn't a dry cough, but one with plenty of phlegm and spit from the back of the throat.

"Papa, please, at least listen. I know you're frustrated, but there isn't anything else to be done. You can't drive, you can barely walk. Please."

He simply sat there in silence, as he deposited the used tissue into the wastebasket and turned back to the television set. The clunky thing was at least three decades old, and it functioned worse than he did. The reason he had hung onto it in the first place was because of the nostalgia for the knockoff American shows and an ignorance of modern television, perhaps more of an indifference to the knowledge.

Lily soon left after arranging the furniture to her liking as he slept, rested, and watched his TV. He dulled his frustration with apathy and whiled away his boredom with distractions. His apartment, still sparsely furnished, felt more mausoleum than home. The only hints to the passing of time was a light that peeked through the curtains. He wondered between passing moments when his granddaughter and her children would visit, to cut the monotony. The truth he began to accept was that he was waiting to die. And if he was to be consigned to death, then at least he was going to wait for it on his terms.

He had no idea how much time passed between his few waking hours and his dreamless slumbers. He began to resolve that his sleeping hours were a punishment from God; even his dreams had been stolen. No longer could his rest be enlivened with halcyon memories or exhilarated with nightmares. Life became his new delirium as time slipped out of his fingers. It was wretched.

In the following weeks, he was visited on occasion by Lily and family members, but it always ended the same; he would sit there, watch his television in silence as they would try to coax him to say something, anything. He never responded. His silence pierced their hearts sharper than any knife could. He already knew that there was no return to the control he once had...so this was the only path that he felt he could take. If all there was left to do was to wait for death, then by God he was going to make sure his life was already dead. Then, during those last cold weeks of October, Lily visited him for a time. She entered from the golden light of the incandescent hallway into the dim, faded apartment; lifeless save for the blue light of the TV that cascaded off the old man's face. She began her usual routine of stocking his refrigerator, which appeared barely touched from her last visit.

"Papa, have you eaten anything? My cabbage is still here," Lily said.

Her father maintained his quietude, the only sound to confirm his existence was his shallow breathing over the barely audible soccer game.

"Fine, don't answer me. Are you happy, Papa? Your own grandchildren won't visit you anymore. You've driven everyone away!" cried Lily as she finally caved to the only thing her father had left for her: silence. The old man sat there, his eyes reflecting the blue light of television and yet Lily could see the pinpricks of tears on his cheeks. He had abandoned everyone and had felt nothing until now. Why was it now of all times? Lily moved towards the door, making for that small portal that separated him from the land of the living. At that moment, the old man felt his chest tighten, as if a cold hand had closed around his heart.

"They love you, you know. They'll love you no matter what god-damnit! They'll visit you, but you have to be there for them as well. Please just say something, anything. I don't care what it is anymore," Lily cried in one last plea to her father as she turned towards the door. She waited for him, and for the first time in weeks, she heard his breath change. It was ragged, a throat hoarse filled with sorrow breathed out.

"Lily, please...don't go," the old man croaked, his voice hoarse from disuse.

Lily turned around as the blinding white rays of LEDs filled her vision. After a moment, she rubbed her eyes open to see the apartment illuminated and her father, standing and reaching out to her as he shakily leaned on his cane. His legs shook with exertion but in his eyes, she could see a hint of that steely determination mingled with

something else. Desperation swam through his head, and he knew that she could tell he was afraid, after all these weeks of hiding. He stood there for five seconds, then ten. And finally, his vision blurred and he collapsed. He crumpled to the floor as if a puppet's strings had been cut. Lily stood there, shocked as a wave of emotion crashed over her. The seeds of joy, just beginning to grow, shriveled in despair as her eyes watered and her voice broke, and she sank to her knees next to him. She could feel his hands were as cold as death.

In the following hours, after the paramedics, who had been hastily dialed by the staff, arrived and pronounced him dead of heart failure, after they took his body to the morgue, Lily finally sat down on his couch, a space away from where he once sat. The curtains were opened, and the morning sky shined in. Her thoughts could finally organize, and she took in the room that her father had decided to lock himself in for the remainder of his life. And to her shock, the cabinet remained unmoved. The boxes were in fact emptied, and the photos were once more lined up on the wall of relatives and friends in their proud frames. She knew that between his fading eyesight and the darkness that shrouded his apartment, he couldn't have been able to see them. But perhaps this is how he wanted it to end in his final moments; the family and him, blind to each other save for the last moments so they couldn't see the cripple fall and only the tender giant.

Aayan Behura

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: John Warner Middle School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Jill Varns

Category: Journalism

"Too Much Affirmative, Not Enough Action"

"We have evaluated that you are a very talented student with very high potential. However, we are currently wrestling with a very high number of applications, and we are subject to laws which confirm that we provide all students with an equal opportunity of accomplishment at Cornell. For these reasons we regret to inform you that you have been denied application to Cornell University."

This letter caught the applicant, Jong, off guard due to the fact that his friend Mike was accepted to the university. Jong (an Asian American) and Mike (an African American) are good friends who have grown up together in all the same schools and have lived in the same neighborhood and community since age four. Both are extremely talented and intellectual, but Jong is an academically stronger student, as he scored higher than Mike on most standardized tests and typically earns better grades.

Dissimilar to Jong's letter, Mike's did not say anything about equal opportunity.

Jong and Mike did some more research and it turned out that affirmative action is a policy that has been in place for decades. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), affirmative action allows colleges to consider factors other than academic/athletic performance, such as race or religion, when deciding if one should qualify for admission to that college.

This policy was originally enacted around six decades ago in an effort to create an equal chance for everyone to succeed in school and work, no matter the demographic disadvantage caused by other factors such as race. Over time, this policy has been revised to include other groups.

Since the first enactment of this controversial policy, it has faced many challenges. One of the most famous challenges to affirmative action precedent was the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case in 2003. While affirmative action precedent was still upheld by the Supreme Court, the decision was not meant to be permanent. As justice Sandra Day O'Connor (who voted to uphold the policy) said, "the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary [in the future]".

This claim that affirmative action is no longer needed in our society today is a reasonable one. First off, according to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, the black population in the U.S. increased by nearly 30% between the start of the second millennium and 2019. Logically, this would increase the amount of African Americans in prestigious colleges. Second, the amount of African Americans with a college degree is increasing at the same rate as the general American population. According to the same study by the Pew Research Center, the number of black people with a college degree increased by nine percentage points between 2000 and 2019, which was the same increase seen by the general U.S. population during the same time period. Statistically, this shows that African Americans are now catching up to other Americans in terms of higher education. Finally, racism decreased since the first implementation of affirmative action, as proven by a study by the Association for Psychological Science, which shows "significant declines" in bias against black Americans.

This exact issue of affirmative action and college applications is currently being considered in the Supreme Court.

In my view, the previous precedent regarding affirmative action was certainly a necessary step forward, as it undoubtedly helped us fight racism in higher education and move forward as a society. However, I would argue that affirmative action is no longer relevant in our modern-day society. While there is definitely a tremendous amount of work to be still done in terms of racism and equal opportunity, the situation today has improved drastically since when MLK gave his *I Have a Dream* speech. College applications should be considered solely based on a student's

capability in their field of expertise.

A mere percentage doesn't tell us if a college is fairly representing students. If two applicants to a college, such as Jong and Mike, are provided with the same opportunity to succeed, the one who is more determined and prepared to achieve their endeavor should be accepted, not the one who is generally underrepresented. I think that it is time for the Supreme Court to put an end to affirmative action in college applications. According to a Pew Research study, as of this year, 73% of Americans share my view.

Actor and writer Paul Mooney put it perfectly, saying affirmative action is "too much affirmative, not enough action".

Alissa Berrie

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe Northwest High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Joshua Trevino

Category: Poetry

More than Midwest

More than Midwest

Why would you settle
For this?

I want more than Midwest .
I'll say it to your face:
Nebraska is not an exciting place.
You don't have culture you have tumbleweeds.
You barely have people,
Neighbors you can't even see.
I love me,
But I can't stand being the only possibility.

I want more than suburbs.
Can't you see there's nothing there?
The most exciting thing they have is their annual state fair.
But you're still holding on to your pride
Thinking you meet my criteria,
You have loads of fields and no better ideas.

There is more to life than farming.
If you could only see past your cornfields you would see all the problems that you're not solving.
I need something to put me back together.
Some helping hands I can't find.
Surrounded by empty skies you can't hear me screaming for help.
It's like you aren't listening,
I love being alone,
But I can't see why you'd want that to be your home.

You know I like adventure.
I'm just feeling stuck here.
I want more than straight white lines on great plains paper.

I want to write my own story,
I'm going to need some plot development.
So start with the setting-
That's where it's at.
It the people *in* the place that make you feel that.

The place sets the stage,
Gives it an atmosphere,
God, I just want to get out of here.

Riley Brown

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Epiphany

A small guitar hangs in the corner of my room adjacent to the window. It often blinds me when the morning sun is refracted through the window, reflecting off the glossy black finish. The guitar hangs openly as if beckoning me to rise and strum the chords that slipped my mind ages ago. The guitar has remained stagnant for years now, yet it dangles there boastfully as if still in use. It serves as a vexing reminder of the sacrifices I previously made. Hours upon hours of painful practice were spent memorizing chords and tablature, in pursuit of a passion with no intrinsic value to me. Hours spent playing were taken away from athletics, academics, and rest. I began to decline in those areas while plateauing in my instrumental prowess. It was apparent that change was needed. Guitar stole precious time, giving me mediocre playing skills at best. I received no joy from playing. The sole reason for continuing was to impress my family and friends. Despite the cons outweighing the pros, abandoning the guitar was difficult for me. It left an empty feeling that I had previously drowned out with persistent practice.

I filled the reopened void with constant studying and physical training to deter the debilitating feeling. Accolades and A's began to trickle in. The resurgence of my success brought me relief. I was well rested, I was getting amazing grades, and I was achieving accolades in athletics I had never dreamed of. Pride in myself began to overflow. I found joy in the act of all these things as a result of the success that was following. I had been pulled from the very depths of despair by the simple act of letting go. I had laughed at people who were unable to let one thing go in order to preserve another. I thought of them as weak and as too privileged of people to have never been forced to choose. Once put in that position I realized it was really just blind willpower, not weakness. It was as if I had been driving straight for hours and had missed my turn a few miles ago, but instead of turning I kept driving on, insisting that eventually, I would get there. Having the resolve to stop the car, pull out a map, and take a detour is where that blind willpower mixes with self-awareness and an understanding of yourself. This is what I believe to be "strength".

Having the resolve necessary to let go of one thing to protect another is the purest form of strength. Being trapped in a poor situation doesn't make one weak for falling into it or even for being there longer than normal. The only true weakness is found in someone who is content with staying there. Some label others as selfish for leaving, but in truth, selfishness is the only possible avenue for growth. Refusal to do what is best for oneself at any given time leaves one susceptible to succumbing to another's imposing circumstances. I chose to be selfish and it led to my exponential growth. It's humorous that I began to understand this lesson after something as simple as dropping the guitar, while others learn this down a horrendous path. Inspiration and information always lie in whichever avenue you choose so long as you're ready to acknowledge them.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Critical Essay

Savage

“The savage stands strikingly close to subhuman species in every aspect of mentality as well as in bodily habits and bodily structure.”

–William McGee, chief of the 1904 World’s Fair Anthropology Days

Twenty million people lined up to see displays of innovation, logic, and technology from around the world. Ice cream cones, airplanes, and x-ray machines were the stars of the elaborate fair that took place in St. Louis. Even more impressive than the gadgets and foods were the lights that lit up the fair in a beautiful illumination powered with electricity. The fair boasted a lavish universal event that allowed the everyday man to experience wonders from around the world. But the 1904 World’s Fair has a dark secret. Beyond the cotton candy and Ferris wheels were humans on display. One of the most forgotten aspects of the fair was what is now known as human zoos.

Dubbed the “ethnographic expedition,” “living exhibits,” “out-of-doors exhibits,” and “universal expedition,” these human exhibits were popular showings at the fair (Vanstone). They were well researched by educated people hailing a degree from Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and other prestigious schools. The goal of these exhibits: prove indigenous people subhuman (“Human Zoos: America’s”). The exhibit’s goals were to show a timeline of the evolution of humans using races as a scale of how advanced people were. Exaggerated rituals and primitive enclosures were shown to make indigenous people look less intelligent and civilized than Europeans, all of which were boasted as innovative studies of anthropology and genetics (“Human Zoos: America’s”).

William McGee (also known as W J McGee or William John McGee) was the head of the fair’s anthropology department. His mission in these exhibits was to show a timeline of human evolution by using live humans as examples of what he believed to be the lowest and highest stages of the human race. The conclusions of anthropology at the time stated Africans were the lowest form of evolved man and were closer to the ape than humans (“Human Zoos: America’s”).

St. Louis was far from alone in this practice of human displays and Europe was the origin. These exhibits were popular in circuses and other entertainment places because people did not have films or ways to travel as easily as today and were amused by seeing people of different cultures live in their “natural state” (“Human Zoos: A Shocking”). Freak shows and touring circuses were popular spectacles in the 19th century but they were all flashy lights and silliness. Ever seen the movie *The Greatest Showman*? Turns out he wasn’t so great. P.T. Barnum’s circus featured people he bought, yes bought for money (Magazine). But P.T.’s circuses never fooled anyone into believing he promoted real science. The exhibits at the fair, however, were not like circuses. McGee wasn’t some wack job carnie looking for a quick buck exploiting ethnic people. He was an educated geologist, anthropologist, and theoretical evolutionist, and the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (“Human Zoos: America’s”). And he wanted more than smoke and mirrors; he wanted to preach. These exhibits at the fair weren’t just entertainment, they were meant to teach the world a timeline of human evolution.

McGee and other educated scientists used their experience in exhibit and museum curation to showcase their human evolution research at the fair. They obtained this research by experimenting on indigenous people. Scientists from Columbia University did tests to measure indigenous peoples’ facial structures, intelligence, and threshold for pain because of the belief that races are genetically and mentally different from each other (“Human Zoos: America’s”). McGee once said, “The savage stands strikingly close to subhuman species in every aspect of mentality as well as in bodily habits and bodily structure” (“Human Zoos: America’s”). This is a perfect summary of what he wanted visitors to get out of these exhibits. He wanted visitors to leave with the knowledge of the savageness that lived among them, a problem fixable only by a superior race.

According to *The 1904 Anthropology Days and Olympic Games: Sport, Race, and American Imperialism* edited by Susan Brownell, the fair “...had five major objectives: (1) to promote the city of STL and

demonstrate its sophistication... (3) to demonstrate the superiority of American democracy, capitalism, and culture; (4) to celebrate industrial, social, commercial, and technological progress.” This is a rather cynical way of viewing the fair and one not expanded in many Missouri classrooms. It shows how important the human exhibits were to the fair’s agenda. Moreover, the fair had a rather large collection of Philippine people and was the pride of the fair since America had recently annexed the Philippines. This use of Filipinos for the exhibit is a blinding example of America showing its imperialism and power. Ultimately, the fair was a display of American superiority projected through the exploitation of indigenous peoples.

The people exhibited at the fair thought the exhibits were meant to share their native country’s culture and society with America. Instead, the fair killed, degraded, and fed misconceptions. For example, from the Philippine village exhibit alone, around one thousand people died. Exhibit organizers tried to set up a “natural” village to show spectators how the people lived. But the Filipinos weren’t prepared for St. Louis’s bipolar weather and were hit with an intense snowstorm. The fair organizers did not know the people had never seen or probably heard of snow before and did nothing to help them. Consequently, many caught pneumonia and died. To make matters worse, when the Filipinos took their dead to perform traditional burial rituals, visitors gathered to watch. The fair turned their funerals into spectacles and their mourning was made into a mockery. Local newspapers called their funerals “exotic” and “pagan rituals.”

But that was just the beginning. Later on, thirteen Filipinos died during the fair and none of their bodies were treated with respect. Not a single body was sent home or buried. Some bodies were sent to the Smithsonian Museum for display and some for scientific study. Three bodies were kept at the fair for public viewing (Wicentowski). Professor Frederic W. Putnam, the head of the 1893 Columbian Exposition’s Anthropology Department considered these to be “life and movement” exhibits featuring authentic native demonstrations living in appropriate habitations demonstrating pre-industrial indigenous customs for the education of viewers (“The”). However, these exhibits were not authentic because the conditions the fair put these people in exhibited their death. The treatment of deceased exhibit victims shows how the visitors saw the Filipinos as barbaric even though they themselves were the ones entertained by viewing dead bodies.

In addition to looking at dead bodies, another sight visitors enjoyed was watching the Igorot tribe eat dogs. The Igorot people were viewed as highly uncivilized for their minimal clothing and dog eating. Dog eating was a practice used by this culture but only for ceremonies and very rarely. Obviously, this detail was ignored since fair leaders fed them dog several times a day for the eight months the fair lasted and wildly blew dog eating out of proportion. Similarly, the Igorot people were made to perform traditional dances and rituals multiple times a day to show visitors (“The”). The staged rituals and fake habitats fair organizers set up were dehumanizing because they did not even try to show visitors an accurate representation of these countries as promised; they used the people for a flashy spectacle and framed the people to appear uncivilized.

St. Louis also needs to understand how human zoos are embedded in the city’s geography. These exhibits are the foundation of many of St. Louis’s landmarks and residential areas. For example, not many people know or acknowledge the human exhibits that took place on the grounds of Washington University, Clayton, Concordia Cemetery, and Forest Park (Vanstone). Forest Park has an information website that says, “The administration building for the fair became Washington University’s Brookings... The Palace of Fine Arts was turned over to the Art Museum in 1906” (“When”). Neither Washington University nor Forest Park has a memorial or plaque to commemorate the horrors of the fair choosing only to highlight the good parts of their history. Forest Park’s website does not do enough to provide an accurate account of what happened at the fair. A mere three sentences mention the human exhibits and they do not provide further research or citations. Additionally, the bodies of the Filipino people who died during the fair were finally buried in unmarked graves at the Archdiocese of St. Louis (Wicentowski). They now remain forgotten and uncared for as patches of dirt. St. Louis has not made a memorial or acknowledgment at the Archdiocese. Furthermore, the Philippine village exhibit is now known as Clayton, a part of the city filled with million-dollar homes without the memory of the people that suffered there (Wicentowski). Residents are ignorant of the ghosts they live on.

Taking a step back from the exhibits shows how much damage was left behind. The city of St. Louis does almost nothing to properly remember the human zoos of 1904. Since most of the land used for the exhibit does not have signs or memorials, most St. Louisians do not know about the entire history of the 1904 World’s Fair. However, Janna Anonuevo Langholz is someone who is trying to keep the memory of the zoos alive. She carries a plaque she had made with her and leads tours meant to educate more people about the exhibits. She says, “[The] city that has done almost nothing to preserve the history and people who came here in 1904...” (Wicentowski). Additionally, she has concluded the memory of these people is disrespected. “To die, be displayed, then forgotten and donated — this was the path of... Filipinos, Africans and Native Americans who met their ends during the fair” (Wicentowski). More people like Janna are needed to fully remember the human zoos.

Furthermore, Forest Park’s website includes a supposed history of the 1904 World’s Fair that boosts the

glory and beauty of the park's history while watering down the truth of the human exhibits. The website does nothing to explain the human exhibits and merely mentions them. They go on about the splendor of the ice cream and cotton candy but not the human exhibits. This exclusion of crucial facts means the fair's human zoos are not explained with proper information. When credible websites do not provide thorough information, St. Louis loses important pieces of history. Moreover, the popular news outlet, *The Atlantic*, published a series of photos from the 1904 World's Fair. It contained pictures of the Pike which was a strip featuring different countries and live exhibits (Taylor). Even though the article includes human zoos along with ice cream and pretty lights in its timeline, it takes a positive stance and does not demonstrate the true ongoing of living exhibits. Its format and captions are placed in a way that makes the people seem like performers happy to be bringing their culture to America.

Will St. Louis ever account for everything that happened at the fair? If such an event happened to a group of Americans there would be outrage and an annual day of remembrance. This is demonstrated in America's strong passion to remember the attacks of 9/11 which includes countless documentaries and memorials. Contrastingly, human zoos are not given another thought. In the summer of 2021, Forest Park, the same place many of the human exhibits took place, put up over seven thousand flags that "pay tribute to the victims and first responders of the 9/11 attacks" ("The flags"). Hopefully, someday the same respect and remembrance will be given to the victims of the human zoos. The city should remember 9/11 but St. Louis also has a responsibility to own up to its past. If they can take the time to set up thousands of flags for predominantly American citizens, they can put up informational signs in the park and write more than a few sentences on their website to give a fraction of justice to the thousands of indigenous people who were displayed in the 1904 World's Fair.

Sadly, these tragedies had an impact on the city of St. Louis and America as a whole. One prime example is Aleš Hrdlička, a scientist who wanted bodies from St. Louis's fair. Aleš was interested in the differences between brains of different races and brought it upon himself to dissect victims of the fair. The Smithsonian Institution liked Hrdlička's work and put his findings and brains on display at one of their museums. Some of the brains remain there today ("Human Zoos: America's"). Additionally, Hrdlička is revered as the Smithsonian's first physical anthropologist and is remembered as a great scientist ("Forensic"). Dissection shows further disrespect and shows how dehumanizing the fair was. Indigenous people went to America with the idea they were to share their culture at a universal fair. Instead, they were treated like animals in a zoo, mocked, killed by disease and snowstorms, and then shipped to another state to be cut up. Similarly, the mastermind of the fair's anthropology department William McGee is remembered as remarkable, intelligent, courageous, ambitious, and more ("F. W. H"). A fairly recent academic journal summarizes the highlights of his career and dotes on his ingenuity. Because McGee once said "love ye one another," the article comments that he was a man of eloquence and human sympathy and understanding ("F. W. H"). It is funny how someone who claimed people should love one another could create something like the human exhibits of 1904. Furthermore, he has a mountain named after him, Mount McGee ("Mammoth"). A mountain, a legacy, a thriving memory, these are all things McGee has that the people exhibited at the fair do not.

Unfortunately, the unfairness continues. The only way to honor those who died in human zoos is to remember them and educate people about how these exhibits came to be. Although human zoos may seem outlandish, when crucial parts of history are forgotten, humanity is bound to make the same mistakes. Moreover, forgetting human exhibits at the fair paints an unrealistic picture. It romanticizes the fair and makes modern audiences think it was all happy fun times with desserts and Ferris wheels. 1904 might feel like ages ago, but it's 2022. In the big picture, that wasn't too long ago. Additionally, Forest Park, Clayton, Washington University, and other sites of the exhibits do not acknowledge the human zoos. Even the Missouri History Museum does not do justice to human zoos in their permanent exhibit about the 1904 World's Fair. The live exhibits are barely mentioned even though there were several exhibits with one taking up forty-seven acres ("Society"). Surely, the thousands of indigenous people enclosed in zoo-like habitats would invoke a museum to discuss these people more. But alas, a few paragraphs was all the space the museum could spare.

Furthermore, St. Louis was just a checkpoint. The exhibits which promoted the idea the European race is superior can be summed up as scientific racism. Scientific racism led to the eugenics movement of the 1920s and 30s which led to Nazi Germany. St. Louis isn't the only city to have hosted these exhibits but it was part of a snowball of racism that helped fuel a war. "Eugenics became a popular social movement in the United States that peaked in the 1920s and 1930s. Books and films promoted eugenics, while local fairs and exhibitions held 'fitter family' and 'better baby' competitions around the country...During the first part of the twentieth century, 32 U.S. states passed laws that resulted in the forced sterilization of more than 64,000 Americans" ("History.com"). The snowball kept rolling and growing and growing because it caused the death of over six million people in World War II. "Adolf Hitler, one of the world's most notorious eugenicists, drew inspiration from California's forced sterilizations of the 'feeble-minded' in designing Nazi Germany's racially-based policies" ("History.com"). Perhaps the 1904 fair's biggest downfall was its role in forming the legacy of World War II. But that's a long story for another time.

After the fair, if the people exhibited were not dead, they were taken to a zoo, circus, or another fair for

further humiliation. Most never went home or saw their families again. William McGee went on to be a member of the Inland Waterways Commission, a group appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt, and president of the National Geographic Society. Overall, St. Louis can never rid itself of the events it hosted but it can remember them. Currently, the memory of the savages is hidden under sparkling lights and a beautiful basin, and it is St. Louis's job to recover it.

Madeline Buchowski

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Poetry

The Firebird Suite: High School, Years 9-12

1. The Firebird

I could have injured the child when I drove
into its yard and tree and gutter and house.
Now, I hold my breath when I drive past the graveyard
just in case it could save me from any bad luck.
It's humiliating—the damage done with a pedal
when in summer I scaled mountains with them.
The scar on the tree trunk is a daily reminder
of picking up the pieces of my smashed car
and hoping that time can erase the sound
from the child's memory. I'm just a kid
and this is all a bit much for me, I think.

2. The Princess

I conceal my spotchy red cheeks with makeup
and powder them pink instead, a more dependable
and consistent hue that will not unveil me when I speak.
My eyes water at my own image when all I'd like to do is listen.
They could all be looking at me so I do not move.
It is my responsibility to stay like this, displayed, polite—
a citizen who stands up amidst the turmoil of
something I'll never see with my own eyes.
At our meals I try not to breath too much and
I smile under the mask that protects me
from having to keep my guard up all of the time.

3. Infernal Dance

I do not think that I meant what I said if
it caused hurt or hate or indifference—
forget what I did but remember what I said
or the other way around if you think that would be better
for you. I really appreciate it. Wishing you the best,
best friend, tell me why I think this way and
why I am wrong and why you love me.
Could you please convince me that life
does not revolve around the number five?
I feel almost as old as this area and the forces
that weigh me down. Here, dreaming of skyscrapers
the lights feel so close and so soon
but in the meantime I'll listen to
you you you you you.

4. Berceuse (Lullaby)

And when I finally looked for once and saw
how many headstones were stacked against one another
I stopped holding my breath and let myself
breathe in the ghosts for the first time in years.
I'm not afraid of a thousand eyes anymore.
The school will always be just a building
across from the plot that's always been a graveyard.
My home is a scrapbook of people who live
thousands of miles away from my city.
If I can't stay here, can I at least go back to them?
I will love you forever: the scattering of remnants
of times that I can't remember but still love
because they never had to be this real life.
What I will remember is the flat mountain
and the knot in the tree that prove that even
disaster is more perfect than we think.

Clarke Campbell

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Obfuscation

Is it ever acceptable to lie to your family? As I grow older and gain more insight into my family's history, I find myself returning to this question often. Despite its morally ambiguous nature, my relatives and familial predecessors have long since answered the question of whether or not to tolerate "well-meaning" deception with a resounding yes. At the heart of every funny familial anecdote of yore that I hear seems to be some willful omission, carefully crafted euphemism, or obscurely relayed message, usually meant to deceive an unsuspecting youngster or obfuscate an uncomfortable truth— but they are all some form of a lie nonetheless. This manifested tolerance, by now entrenched in my family's interpersonal dynamics, has resulted in negative consequences ranging from subtle to salient; yet, I've discerned byproducts of that same tolerance that are creative and powerful. I continue to wonder, have the positive outcomes of this quasi-ethical family tradition outweighed the negatives?

It's not hard to find ways in which tolerance of omission and secrecy in particular has negatively impacted my family. The clearest example of this can be found in the matter of my grandfather's health, especially at the end of his life, as he battled Parkinson's disease. Whether from embarrassment or some other reason, my grandfather, Charles, completely refused to let his wife or children tell *anyone* about his Parkinson's, and it was almost *a decade* after his 2007 diagnosis that I was finally clued in by my mother; even on his deathbed, as he succumbed to the ailments of that very same disease, he still hadn't told his own sister about it. Parkinson's was not his only affliction that was hidden from the rest of us: literally yesterday, as I was beginning to write this paper on the third anniversary of his death, one of my mother's cousins (and thus Charles' nephew) asked her if Charles had ever been treated for colon cancer. He had, a few years before his death, but clearly that had also remained a secret outside of his immediate family; I only ever found out about it by accident, and apparently even years *after his death* the knowledge of it has remained hidden and limited. While it isn't unreasonable to expect privacy in one's personal affairs, especially on health-related matters, this refusal to recognize and truthfully share important information with his relatives strained many relationships within the family. To me, the actively sustained illusion that Charles was in good health, even as he declined rapidly in his final years, seemed to remove a layer of emotional sincerity from his interactions with other people, including his kids and grandkids. Additionally, even if it was perhaps easier to pretend in the moment, my mother and her siblings especially were left completely unprepared and enormously devastated when he eventually did pass away; and at its core, this pretense would not have been possible without the enduring permissiveness of secrecy present within my family. Clearly, my family has been hurt by this tolerance— so what positive impact could possibly compensate for its negative effects?

For that, we must look into the mind of Elizabeth, my mother's first cousin, on a blustery August evening in 1990. Gazing across the dining room and out the slightly-opened windows opposite her, she could just make out the trees swaying to and fro like silhouettes against the dying twilight, as darkness loomed over the botanical gardens. Whenever the chatter of conversing guests momentarily quieted, or the scrapes of forks and knives against porcelain plates and bowls momentarily ceased, the rustling of wind-whipped leaves would fill the silence without hesitation; Elizabeth liked it that way, liked how the nature could assuage any doubt or tension in the air. She turned to the man beside her at the table,— her husband-to-be, David,— who was scratching his collar with one hand and adjusting his bow-tie with the other, and who quickly met her gaze. Just as she opened her mouth to mention the trees, however, the resounding ring of a well-placed spoon striking a champagne flute reverberated around the room; a toast was being made. And so, with the buzzing chatter slowly dwindling among the guests, she turned to find who else but her Uncle Charles, my grandfather, standing with a glass in his hand, glasses on his nose, and a few curiously folded sheets of paper held up in front of him.

Clearing his throat, my grandfather surveyed the room before peering down his face at the notes in his hand. "First, I want to congratulate my niece on her engagement," he began, "and congratulate David on his not running away from her when he had the chance." Chuckles erupted across the dining room; a year before, David had skipped his Harvard Law School graduation, opting instead to accompany Elizabeth into the Amazon rainforest to study Peruvian ecology, and they had both come back with an intact relationship (and the tropical disease *leishmaniasis*) six months later. "But I am not the only one congratulating you tonight. Of course, your parents have already given their spiels, and everyone here no doubt wishes you well. However, on this momentous occasion, there is someone else that has instructed me to give you her congratulations: my very own mother, and your grandma, Momo." With that, he pocketed the first page of his notes, before unfolding a yellowed letter, filled with typed lines of smudged black ink, and waving it around at his captivated audience. Quiet murmurs filled the room as guests conferred in confusion; after all, Tesse "Momo" Werner had passed away over a decade prior, in 1979, and there had been no mention of any such letter before. But Charles was undeterred, and after clearing his throat once more, he continued. "I found this letter a few weeks ago, hidden in my safe-deposit box. Evidently, my mother left it for me before she passed away, to be read to you on the occasion of your wedding, and luckily I found it just in time!" It was beginning to dawn on Elizabeth that this letter might not really have been written by its attributed authoress, but she simply smiled and motioned for him to continue. With a final clear of the throat, Charles began reading the letter aloud: "My dearest Elizabeth..."

This rehearsal dinner, on the night before the first wedding of one of "Momo's" grandchildren, thus marked the beginning of a decades-long tradition of "Momo's Letters," a series of correspondence signed by my great-grandmother Tesse, dated the year before her death, and coincidentally revealed on birthdays, anniversaries, and big life achievements. As my great-aunt Carolyn, Elizabeth's mother, details, "In each letter, Tesse miraculously foretold future events and described all the foibles, mishaps and joyous events that her offspring were likely to encounter after her death," through the unique voice and perspective of a socially-conscious, well-mannered woman of the Lost Generation. Carolyn further recalls that in the letters, "[Tesse] always managed to mention that Charles was her favorite child, and we were [teasingly] reminded of [her and their other brother's] many shortcomings..." Within my own childhood, the prevalence of Momo's letters at family events slowly dwindled, but even near the end of his life, I remember watching my grandfather shakily pulling letters out from the back pocket of his wheelchair and motioning for one of his children to read them aloud. Even at his funeral, one final 'discovered' Momo's Letter was read, "predicting" in detail everything about Charles' life and his impact on his family and the union workers he represented.

It's true that Momo's Letters were a highly anticipated part of family gatherings and occasions, and that, as my aunt Carolyn relates, "When [Charles] would stand up and reach into his coat pocket to pull out a new letter, the audience would always cheer him on." But Momo's Letters were more than just a long-running gag; rather, they served as creative vehicles for my grandfather to praise his loved ones and proudly exhibit their accomplishments. When you got a Momo Letter from Charles, you knew it would not only be cleverly contrived to accommodate Tesse's ever-antiquated worldview, circumvent any question of the impossible nature of her forecasted omniscience, *and* be riddled with family inside jokes, but also would be full of real admiration and pride that Charles wanted to convey. There was no such thing as a perfunctory Momo Letter: with obstacles like the confines of the letters' supposed background, each one was the clear product of copious effort and time spent. In this way, I think Momo's Letters, despite being "lies" at their core, were so much more valuable to my family and letter recipients within it than a simple "congratulations," or "well done," could ever have been.

Yes, "tolerating anything other than the unadulterated, entire truth" as I've explored it here encompasses both of these examples, but they could not be more different. I've come to realize that my own dissatisfaction with the secrecy surrounding my grandfather's health probably actually comes from a more personal feeling of frustration and anger with his Parkinson's itself, rather than with my family's willingness to aid and abet his outward denial; after all, it was ultimately his prerogative whether or not to share the burden of his health with others, and he simply chose what he thought was right, even if there were adverse impacts on my family. And perhaps it could've been even more powerful if my grandfather instead chose to convey his "Momo's Letter" praise and feelings by taking ownership of them himself, rather than speaking through a fictitious, reincarnated caricature of his mother; but in truth, whether he wasn't quite comfortable doing that or was simply challenging himself to be creative through the Letters, the fruits of his "lie" were meaningful and touching to those around him.

As a result, I think my family's tolerance for a little affable deception has thus far had a greater positive impact

than a negative one. But my grandfather is gone, his Letters (mostly) and Parkinson's along with him, so I can only guess what products of this tolerance will sprout and grow going forward. As I look to the future, I wonder how this tolerance will further shape both my family and my life on the whole; I'll always keep asking myself, is it still worth it?

Isabel Cepeda

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Mariposa

Mariposa

The butterfly
It flutters
Quietly,
Yet loudly enough to hear and feel a glimmer of
Hope.
The frigid window meets my nose
Where could it be?
There!
A momentary yellow flash
And it flutters away
Back into Moonlight.

Will he ever come back?
I can only
Hope.
I long for those days when I would see him
I miss when we were always together
But now
The light is gone
The blissful ignorance is gone
The cries of laughter
Gone!??

“Are you okay?”
I’m fine.
Right?
And once again nose to glass
Where could it be?
There!
A momentary yellow flash
And it flutters away
Back into Moonlight.

Emily Chien

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Lauren Ann Williams

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Definition of Unfair

I used the word unfair very frequently. I said it was unfair that I received a low score on a test. I said it was unfair that I lost a board game. I said it was unfair that my parents grounded me after sneaking out. I never really wrapped my head around the word unfair, only associating it with minor inconveniences. However, an action of something unfair, is an act of injustice. Even knowing the meaning, I blindly used this word. Unfortunately, I learned what true unfairness meant—only truly understanding this term when a piece of my childhood was ripped out of my soul. When I was left with a trail of lingering woe, weighing me down in every step I took. When a chain was locked on my ankles, leaving me locked into an endless cycle of anguish. I understood what unfair meant from the ghost of my grandma.

When I think about my childhood, I see my grandma and me mixing pork, green onions, and cabbage to wrap into dumplings. I see my grandma and me sewing pillows, plushies, and all kinds of things imaginable. I see my grandma and me sitting on our porch, feeding the birds and closely watching for deer and rabbits. I see a beautiful woman with silver hair, a sweet wrinkly smile, and eyes that turn into crescent moons when she laughs. Even at eighty years old, she was always full of life. She laughed at the smallest things; a cat dressed in a dog costume, a prank she had pulled on my grandfather, or a word I mispronounced in Chinese. My grandma was my favorite person, and I was hers. It was always my grandma and me. Me and my grandma.

My grandma is the most selfless person I have ever known. If I wanted something, she would do everything in her power for me to have it. I was fortunate enough to visit China every other summer break to spend time with my family. During the summer of 2019, my family undertook a difficult hike in China. My grandma always loved everything about nature but couldn't hike with us as she had broken her leg. Even on crutches, it was unbearable for her to stand up for more than forty-five minutes. The mountain was located in a remote village, extremely far from my family's hometown. No one in my family owned a car, so it was a five-hour bus ride to the mountain. We hiked on a lengthy treacherous trail under the glistening sun, surrounded by green mountains peeking above a luminous sky. At the side of the trail was a small wooden cart with a beautiful red bracelet lying on top. I instantly fell in love and wore the bracelet everywhere I went for weeks. My grandma knew how much I adored the bracelet as I told her the story of our hike and finding the bracelet over and over again. Unbelievably, only a couple of days after, I lost the bracelet. I begged my mother to take me back to the mountain so I could replace it; instead, I was given a lecture on being more responsible. I was infuriated with myself. When my grandma returned to our apartment late afternoon, she held the bracelet in the palm of her hand. My face dropped.

With a broken leg and two crutches, my grandma had traveled five hours by herself to get to the trail. Although barely able to stand, she hiked to the top of the mountain to replace my bracelet.

With school, it was hard to travel to China during winter break, so my grandma flew to America every December to visit my family. We had a warm green room in the corner of my house designated for her. Her face would light up with excitement as she slowly walked around the room, and she would lay her finger on each photo of my brother and me. She would stare at the pictures while laughing and reminiscing about the story of each photo. Her room was comforting; it was my safe place. It had her sewing kit on the nightstand, an unnecessary supply of tiger balm in the left drawer of the cabinet, and pictures of my brother and me that she collected in a little tin box. Every night, I would walk to her room and crawl up next to her in bed. Even with my broken Chinese and my grandma unable to speak English, we could still talk about anything and everything for hours. We would talk about my relationship with my parents, our favorite meals, and what we did throughout the day. If we ran out of subjects to talk about, she would pull out a deck of cards, and we would play until we were too tired to move our arms. Life was beautiful and more than fair.

My grandma is the strongest person I have ever known. When she was in the hospital, she never looked like she was suffering, there was never a tear running down her face, and she always illuminated the stark hospital room

with her huge smile. My grandma got sick often; she had diabetes and a history of heart attacks. I always got scared seeing my grandma lying on the bleak white hospital mattress, but she made the hospital into a fairytale. She told me it was a vacation for her, a place with an infinite variety of delicious food, fast room service, and soft pillow sheets. In my eyes, the hospital was a temporary and fun stay because that's what she had convinced me.

My grandma lied.

She had fallen ill in China. Not the ill where you had a rough fall or the ill where you had body sores and aches. She fell ill to the point where she had five machines strapped to every part of her body. The type of ill where she was unconscious, unable to breathe by herself, and barely staying alive. The kind of ill where she had to be kept in the ICU for weeks. She had a terrible blood clot causing her blood pressure to be at a lethal rate. The dialysis machine was the only thing that kept her going. How could this have happened to such a beautiful soul? It didn't feel right; it didn't feel fair. The hospital, once a dream, transformed into a nightmare.

In China, another outbreak of COVID-19 and panic struck the country. The hospital claimed my grandma was taking too many resources. The hospital claimed they needed all resources if a young person fell ill. The hospital claimed it needed to take away my grandma's dialysis machine. Forty-five minutes after the machine was taken away, my grandma's life was also taken.

The woman who raised me since I was a baby, the woman who loved me more than life, the woman who was my person, was taken away.

Nothing can fill that missing part of my life. Flowers from family friends, shopping trips to the mall, and ice cream will never ease the pain. Somedays, I wish I was never close with my grandmother because losing her was the sharpest, most wretched, and most agonizing pain I have ever felt. When I heard the news, my stomach dropped to the floor. My mind completely froze, and it felt like the earth had stopped spinning. I was leaning on the wall and fell to the hardwood floor, screaming and sobbing for hours.

Flowers from family friends, shopping trips to the mall, and ice cream will never ease the pain. Somedays, I wish I was never close with my grandmother because losing her was the sharpest, most wretched, and most agonizing pain I have ever felt. When I heard the news, my stomach dropped to the floor. My mind completely froze, and it felt like the earth had stopped spinning. I was leaning on the wall and fell to the hardwood floor, screaming and sobbing for hours.

Days went by slower and old friends would confront me about how I was treating them unfairly because I had been distant. My teachers would email me, letting me know how it was unfair that I needed extensions on assignments. I felt like I was the only person who understood what unfair meant; it meant losing the person who loved me the most. Never being able to wrap dumplings, sew blankets, sit on the porch, and have late-night conversations with my grandmother ever again. I knew what unfairness meant as it crushed my dreams for my grandmother and me's future. Crushing the dream of my grandma sitting in the stands watching me graduate. Crushing the dream of my grandma sitting at the front seat of my wedding. Crushing the dream of my grandma raising my children. I have now learned what unfairness is.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jeanne Gillanders

Category: Critical Essay

Analysis of “Outcast” by Claude McKay

Through the incorporation of a wide scope of diction, the application of literary devices, and the use of figurative language to illuminate hidden meaning beneath the poem’s surface, “Outcast” by Claude McKay explores the lingering desires and losses of a man disconnected from his culture.

McKay portrays the speaker’s yearning to fit in with his heritage, a yearning that only reinforces their inability to conform. McKay’s choice to set a negative tone by invoking diction that embodies negativity is prevalent throughout the sonnet. For instance, try comparing *the sun glistens* to *the sun glares*. While the word *glistens* radiates a positive, sparkly connotation, the word *glares* offers an uncomfortable, intense, and harsh feeling. Turning to the world of the poem, McKay offers diction that is consistently negative in tone following his reflection on the cultural, geographical, and religious distance he feels from his heritage—which he shows through the “forgotten jungle songs” (4) he cannot sing, the “great western world hold[ing] me in fee” (6), and praying to “its alien gods” (8). He writes:

Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of Earth, a thing apart[.] (13-16)

Specifically, McKay chooses to use the words “lost” (13), “gone out” (14), “ghost” (15), and “apart” (16). At first glance, these words reinforce the hopeless and sad mood of the sonnet, but after analyzing the poem as a whole, these words evidently also gesture to the separation between the speaker and their background. Using the phrase “a thing apart,” McKay makes it clear that the speaker views himself as a thing and not a person, contributing to the image of the ghost referenced in the prior line of the poem. McKay suggests that the speaker is questioning his identity and asking himself the question: Who am I? In fact, McKay’s use of a period after “apart” emphasizes the word, which therefore also emphasizes the idea that the speaker is a thing. In addition, McKay sets a tone of suppression at the beginning of the poem through diction that invites darkness and confinement into the poem: “From the dim regions whence my fathers came/My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs” (1-2). With the use of “My spirit, bondaged”, McKay is suggesting that the speaker’s spirit is enslaved, which further supports the focal point of the separation between the speaker and his father’s hometown. Despite the speaker’s desire to be more connected to his hometown, he is “bondaged” to a body that remains far from it; instead, the speaker is depicted as being trapped against his will, unable to break free. Through these and other instances of specific word choice, McKay successfully conveys the severe detachment from his heritage without resorting to explaining it outright in the poem.

Through personification, McKay relates the idea of the speaker’s loss of cultural identity following geographical alienation from his father’s homeland. Specifically, McKay uses personification to display the effects of growing up in a different culture than that of one’s parents or extended family. For example, McKay references a tradition buried deep in the mind of the speaker: “My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.” (4). The personification of the soul’s forgotten song emphasizes how the speaker desires to relate to his dad’s past and learn the traditions. As Horace Mann says, “The living soul of man, once conscious of its power, cannot be quelled.” McKay emphasizes the agency and power of the soul through awarding it the human-like ability to sing, while showing that the speaker’s soul tries to connect with the speaker’s background, but has been alienated from it for too long to re-establish a connection. The separation between the speaker’s heritage and reality is partly due to his geographical isolation from his ancestral homeland, which McKay demonstrates through a passage immediately the image of the soul’s “forgotten jungle songs.”

I would go back to darkness and to peace,
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my knee. (5-8)

In particular, McKay uses personification in the line “the great western world holds me in fee” (6) to show that the western world is restraining the speaker. The speaker is unable to cross the physical boundaries, resulting in the speaker’s ongoing struggle to access his identity. The line “I may never hope for full release” (7) shows the speaker’s captivity far away from their heritage. The last line, “While to its alien gods I bend my knee,” (8) symbolizes that the speaker is surrendering or accepting a foreign god, hinting at his eventual acceptance of cultural assimilation. Because the speaker lives in the western world, he eventually understands he must accept the predominant god of western culture in order to be accepted by western people and government. The usage of personification benefits the speaker in expressing the intensity of alienation from one’s culture.

McKay uses figurative language, especially metaphor and rhyme, to reveal the speaker’s strong sense of isolation. Many of the poem’s metaphorical lines contain meanings hidden beneath the surface; within this depth, McKay communicates the idea of feeling like the outcast the title references. Specifically, McKay’s use of metaphor uses a ghost metaphor to demonstrate how out of place the speaker feels. He writes:

Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart[.] (9-12)

Immediately after McKay’s speaker processes what he has “lost” (9)—what “vital thing has gone out of my heart” (10)—McKay makes the ghost metaphor all the more effective by breaking the poetic line right after its mention. On the surface level, it’s easy to recognize that the speaker lives like a ghost, but the deeper meaning suggests that the speaker feels invisible in his own homeland, unseen by the world. With this metaphor, McKay demonstrates that the speaker doesn’t want to attract any attention to himself because he doesn’t want to feel like even more of an outcast than he already is. Similarly, McKay uses rhyme to emphasize how isolated the speaker feels from his parents’ hometown: “For I was born, far from my native clime,/Under the white man’s menace, out of time” (13-14). Similar to the first example in this paragraph, this part of the sonnet focuses on the idea of the speaker being an outcast. The speaker is born and immediately assimilates into the culture of the “white man’s menace.” The rhyming of clime and time binds the two lines together. McKay wanted the two lines to be read as a pair emphasizing the fact that the speaker still has an unfilled desire to rekindle his connection to his ancestral homeland. With the use of metaphor and rhyme, McKay reinforces the isolation between the speaker.

“Outcast” by Claude McKay represents the struggle of a speaker who has lost his connection to his ancestral roots, but hasn’t yet fit into the world where he now resides. As a result, the poem leaves the speaker where he began: an outsider in life longing to fit into a culture that feels more accepting than his present one.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sara Elkamel

Category: Poetry

Hot Tub; Cornered Among Clouds of Thought, Fog

hot tub

sitting in the ice bath alone. chills
shooting through my body, piercing
the tension between me and the world.
i tell myself it's a hot tub. the visions
of my silver plaque overpowering the urge
to jump out. to stomp away.

i want everybody
to know: my name is stolen
like a melody. why

do i do this to myself? the mental challenge,
the pressure, and the isolation
from the world. look at me: i'm sitting

by myself, enduring the pain, my fingers
pruned, my toes numb. but—

there is no but! nothing is
solved. i'm the same girl who jumped
into the storm—maybe a little less

sore, but with all of the same
challenges. i see no change.
competitive sports are addictive drugs.

Cornered Among Clouds of Thought, Fog

froths, encloses the lingering memory
of the ball rolling wide of the white,
cylinder post, a lightning storm of players running, sunken

smiles plastered on my teammates' faces. following
the lightning, thunder trembles, echoing
the voice of my coach: *sarah, i believed*

in you. i trusted you. the voices of past
coaches bounce between the chambers
of my ears, amplified. rain
rushing across Creve Coeur, washing away
any last positivity and hope, the spring
2019 season, my game-winning golden goal

of fall fest, even
the time my coach said: *sarah, you are*
the star, never change. you're the next

becky sauerbrunn of st. louis. everyday i pray.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Peter LaBerge

Category: Poetry

Singing “Silent Night” on the Field Hockey Field; Ode to Bronchitis; Charles River

Singing “Silent Night” on the Field Hockey Field

for my mom

Because the game will end soon & we will win. The moment the crowd finishes I will drop my stick. I will hop the fence, and I will jump straight into your open arms. We will pick each other up, swing each other around, and sing to the chants of the home crowd. When we will look at each other through tears, we will smile and whisper, We did it. We will frame this photograph on our walls and it will be plastered across the face of our school's newspaper. I will tell my children about the moment I landed in your arms. You will tell your grandchildren about the feeling of crying happy tears as you caught me. We will continue to dream gems, but we won't forget the time we cried real tears, grasping each other, gasping for air. We watched others leap into their dads' arms, kiss their moms, and jump into a pile of their teammates. The same field, same day, same team, just one year before. The generations of players before me, decades of fans, athletes who wore my jersey number—each of them will move on, but they will never forget. I will win for them, for us. I will fuel my fire with what captains before me have said. And one day we will swing each other round and round—medals in one hand, raising the trophy with the other. And again we will fill the night with song.

Ode to Bronchitis

It seems to be a pattern now—every six months.
Is it from the bacterial infection in your lungs, the running

in sub 30 degrees, or the screaming Been there, Done that! at the Pitbull concert? I pinch your throat and you are

Lindsey Lohan, sitting under the blinding
dental lights, strawberry shortcake running

side to side on the screen above, and Dr. Schreiner
with a sharp, metal, pointed viking tool

in one hand, and his enormous pair of tweezers
in the other. Grasping your chin, yanking your jaw to prick off

the glue plastered on your molars. A similar feeling
to when I had grown, your throat shattered

with each cough, others around you jumping out
of your orbital. Or resembling the time you hurled yourself

past the white endline, Janie yelling 4! 3! 2! I almost hurled
out of you. Milliseconds later, I did, but you know me too

well. After, you stop at Walgreens to pick up Mucinex DM
(the liquid version) and Ricola Honey Lemon, then brand new

Reese's Pumpkins. Next spring it will all be the same, except
then, it will be Reese's Eggs.

Charles River

Though the moon was only a waning crescent, there
was a subtle glow encompassing the night. It could have

been one of the premier dinner cruises, the final
Boston Duck Boat tour of the night, or the construction

of BU's new Jenga-like building for computer and data sciences.
The night wasn't the only thing glowing as the pathway along

the Charles River held me in a trance. My fingers
curled around my mom's, our feet stepping in sync

down the iconic red brick path of Boston, the one inspired
by the Freedom Trail. The city sang: the bliss puh-puh-puh

of sailboats, the occasional honk of a taxi driver—but
my mom's voice silenced them. She'd say, "You are meant to live

in Boston. Work hard and you can get here one day.
It's too late for me, but make this hike an everyday thing."

The words pinched my heart, as my body floated
through the star-lit night. Now, pulling on

my crimson sweatshirt, I closed my soft, rose curtains
but still the sun passed through the dorm room, like

light passing lucidly through a year.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Steven Espada Dawson

Category: Poetry

Validation

Validation

Shining medals and trophies.
Are athletes "public" dreams.
When achieved happiness beams.
But no athlete ever talks,
About the goal of self validation.
The idea of self validation is amorphous to each,
But the common thing is it's often hard to reach.

The happiest moment of an athlete's life.
Is when they've reached a consistent point of achieving,
Self validation.
It's often rare to be so good,
But it is my dream.
To be happy every time i play,
With my success and performance.
To hear my coach say,
Great job today!
"I can do it!"

That one moment of validation,
Turns my world.
It's more rewarding than winning.
Because it helps me reach self validation.

Self validation is intoxicating.
When the bar is set to high,
Your confidence is the thing that lowers,
Every game is worse than the last.
Until you are at rock bottom with your performance.
Your coaches are yelling and lowering,
your self value,
even more.

"I can't do it."
Just because you love the game,
Doesn't mean you always have to like it.

Owen Eisenbath

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Down By Two

Down by Two

As I walked toward the plate, my dad yelled some words of encouragement, yet no matter how loud he could have shouted, it would have been blocked out by the thumping of my heart in my chest, beating in a ferocious pattern like a drummer on his solo. Two outs, down by two runs, bottom of the fifth, bases loaded. This is a moment that every baseball player dreams of. A moment to step up, and be a hero to win the game. Before stepping into the batter's box, I take a deep breath and knock the dirt off my cleats with the end of my aluminum bat, the soft thrum of the bat vibrating and calming me. Then I step in.

We had given up a quick lead in the first two innings; putting the Recruits up 5-0. Then, in the third and fourth innings, we had started to crawl back into the game mustering up a three-run push. After a quick inning, we managed to get three outs in the top of the fifth. A lead-off double followed by two walks and two strikeouts had gotten us to this situation. I had been in a slump for most of the season, but recently I had some small success in our recent tournament at Vianney High School, earning me a place at the fourth-hitting spot in the line-up, a spot known to hold big hitters.

As I zoned back in, the thumping of my heart disappears, as well as everything else. The familiarity of the box released a sense of calmness that fell over me like a wave, to the point where everything else just seemed to fade out of view. As the opposing pitcher toed the rubber, he kicked the dirt off the synthetic turf-covered mound. My teammates started clapping with their hands in the hope of distracting him, but it seemed that he too, was so focused it didn't bother him. As I took my position in the box, I stared down at the pitcher as he received his signs from the catcher. As he lifted his foot, my body set in motion, my hands dropping just above my bicep, my toe lifting ever so slightly off the ground. Finally, I decided to swing, touching my toe to the ground, and throwing my hips and hands at the ball, putting every ounce of strength I have into one swing. As my body turned in unison, my eyes found the ball just over the inside of the cracked white plate. I took the knob of the shiny aluminum bat straight toward the ball. The familiar ring of the bat made the crowd stand up from their seats, and as the ball soared off my bat, I found myself dashing down to the first base. But then the umpire's sharp words brought me back down to reality.

"Foul ball!" the umpire exclaimed.

I trotted back down to the box disappointed in the hit. But as I stepped in, the calmness that was so familiar just a minute ago was gone. The drum of my heart quickened; I wanted to call time but I was frozen in place. As the pitcher wound up, I found myself making a motion that was not my own. The unfamiliarity continued as my bat lugged through the zone at a sluggish pace barely allowing me to make contact with the ball. The sounds I had so easily been pushing out before were now all cramming themselves into my head like a beehive, buzzing around in a swarm, invading my thoughts.

In the midst of all of this, the pitcher had gotten into his set position, and I wasn't able to notice until he slowly lifted the tip of his rubber cleats off the mound. But the harmonious dance we had been doing the first pitch was now an off-beat freestyle where the pitcher controls the rhythm. I had no time to think or react before the ball was out of his hand and heading toward the plate. In a futile attempt to save my reputation and the game, I swung my arms toward the ball. But it was as feeble as a minnow trying to swim upstream the Mississippi. The ball hit the catcher's glove with a pop that seemed to echo throughout the stands creating a silence so quiet it was ear-piercing. Then the umpire's shout finally broke the stillness.

"Strike three!" he bellowed.

The other team's coaches and infield leaped with joy as the pitcher strutted back to the dugout. My teammates and I slumped back to the dugout where the rest of the team was seen packing up quickly as if to ignore the sense of

defeat and disappointment of the at-bat I had just shown. My coach sat us down in the grass just behind the dugout for his ritual postgame speech. He talked about the usual stuff coaches say after a loss, how “we can compete with those guys but we just got out hustled”. But this time, it was different for me. All of the “what ifs” and “if only’s” rushed through my head until I had concluded I had let my team down. But it wasn't like I hadn't tried. I had given it all I had, but I had still failed. “What did I do wrong?” I asked myself. I had loaded at the right time, I took breaths before the at-bat, I had gotten focused, and I was confident. All of these are part of a good at-bat. Yet I had failed in the moment of pressure and instead of getting a hit and tying or even winning the game, I had crumbled, like sand in a strong wind.

On the drive home, my dad and I sat in silence, daring each other to say the first word. Finally, my dad spoke up, “Don't beat a dead horse. You've put this team on your back and carried them through some tough situations, and we probably wouldn't have gotten to that point without you.”Brightening my mood a little bit, but soon the disappointment fought its way back inside of my head. “Hey, you win some you lose some, at least you gave it your all.” He continued, still trying to get my mind off of the game. But that was it; I had been taught that when you truly put your effort into something you will always get the desired result, but if that had been the case I would still be playing, instead of sitting in the passenger's seat of a car with the salty taste of tears in my mouth.

Ajay Eisenberg

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Christian Schaeffer

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

More is Less, More or Less

More is Less, More or Less

I unscrewed the lid of the blender and released the vibrant, stinging scents of cilantro, ginger, and bird's-eye chilies. My pinky dipped into the bright green *chutney*, but something tasted off; I turned to the spice cabinet. Enticing red and yellow powders that my grandmother had smuggled through customs caught my eye, but my hand reached past them. I grabbed the *berbere*, an Ethiopian blend of dozens of hot peppers and warm spices, that I had made a few days earlier. After dumping a generous spoonful of the blend into the sauce, I gave it another taste. My *chutney*--rich, flavorful, and smoky--barely resembled my grandmother's simple version. Mine was better. I poured the sauce out of the blender and into a presentable bowl. As I laid out a few frozen samosas that my grandmother and I made during her last visit, the front door creaked open.

Padasparshan: an Indian tradition of touching the feet of elders to show respect and seek blessings. When meeting my grandparents, my mother always glares at me until I indulge her in this act of reverence. As I hurried to the door and bent down, my grandparents assured me that "there is no need" but I could still see the joy in their eyes as they watched me follow tradition. For them, *padasparshan* is just as much about respecting elders as it is about respecting Indian culture.

After taking off his shoes, my grandfather sniffed the air and smiled.

"It smells like food," he announced, a more polite way of saying that he was hungry. I led him to the kitchen, where fresh samosas and chutney lay waiting. Face akin to a food critic, he stooped down to inspect the potato filled pastry and its bright green accompaniment. I offered him a seat and awaited his judgment.

My grandfather left India in 1966, a year after Congress overturned the Asian Exclusion Act. Thousands of miles from home, he struggled as a vegetarian in America, the land of the hamburger and hot dog. Eventually, my grandfather grew accustomed to Detroit's finest selection of Mexican, Chinese, and Italian restaurants. He never thought to question the authenticity of bean tostadas, because for him, America was just as foreign as Mexico.

My mother, grandmother, and I watched as he chewed. My grandfather's expression soured as he tasted the food I had prepared.

"It tastes wrong," he declared. My grandmother glared at her husband, trying to inspire some politeness, but he had made up his mind. "What did you do to the chutney?" my grandfather demanded.

My grandfather proudly recalls the day that he, not quite 10 years old, threw a rock at a British soldier in Mumbai. Though he now holds an American passport, my grandfather takes unmistakable pride in being Indian. So when my grandfather sees his white son-in-law eating butter chicken with his left hand, my grandfather can not help but cringe at these offenses.

I can still hear his shame: "This food is disrespectful to India, it's disrespectful to your culture." I held the remnants of the *chutney* above the sink as my eyes added more salt to the sauce. The green sauce poured down the drain as I churned the garbage disposal, washing away my shame.

Indian food focuses on culture, not ingredients. I remember helping my grandmother in the kitchen before I was any help at all: how she added a spoon of sugar to a tiny paratha just for me, even after she had rolled out dozens for dinner. Indian food is about tradition, and passing down family recipes for generations. What I thought I had improved, I had only adulterated. The label 'Indian-American Cuisine' is, by definition, a misnomer: American food is an alloy, a product of the Great Melting Pot, but Indian food is pure and incompatible with fusion.

"Beta, my child. Stop your crying." His tone was sharp and demanding, but his next words softened the blow. My grandfather told me that when he came to America, he didn't miss a spice or a dish. Instead, he missed coming home to his younger brothers playing chess on the stone floor as the aunties picked cilantro leaves in the kitchen and

the uncles talked loudly as they set the table. He missed the Rajasthani sun in Detroit's bleak winters. And he missed his mother's cooking, but really he missed his mother. He told me that more isn't always better, and that simple things are often the most complicated.

Bruce Elvin

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kelly Walsh

Category: Short Story

Dreams of the Sito Deadlands

"Owen, can you check the mail? I have my hands full at the moment," Owen's mom said.

"Sure," responded Owen who lately had been excited to check the mail to see if any colleges had sent him personal letters. Owen was a junior in high school and sometimes would receive encouraging notifications from various colleges around the country to either visit their schools over the summer or apply to them next year as a senior. He hurried down the stairs, burst out the front door, and scurried down the driveway. Their rusted shabby mailbox was more stuffed than usual and creaked loudly as Owen opened it. He pulled out the stack of unevenly sized envelopes out of the box, consisting of his family's assortment of overdue bills; below the pile was a chartreuse soft, padded envelope addressed to Owen. No return address was provided, which was odd to Owen. Plus, the coloring made it stick out like a sore thumb.

Despite living in a relatively safe neighborhood, Owen's mother survived paycheck to paycheck and they lived in a run-down, nearly dilapidated house with a leaky roof and pipes that often froze in the winters and sometimes even burst. Since Owen's father's death three years ago, his mother worked multiple shifts, and Owen even had taken on an after-school job to cover their expenses. His employment interfered with his study time, which forced Owen to give up some of his hobbies as well as forced him to deemphasize some of his relationships with his friends. He was quite mature for being seventeen, yet people frequently mistook him for a freshman rather than a senior in high school given his short, reedy stature. His Subway sandwich shift manager often admired Owen's strong work ethic because he always covered for his coworkers if they called in sick. In spite of these obstacles, Owen tried his best to maintain his grades and had scored well on standardized tests. Owen hurried back to the house then called to his mom, "Mom! Mom! I just got an important-looking piece of mail."

With her typical flurry of questions that did not necessitate sequential answering, his mom asked, "Where did it come from? Who sent it? Are you sure it's addressed to you?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm pretty confident that it's addressed to me." The postmark says Boston, but the return address is blank.

"Really? I'll be there in a second to check it out with you. She rushed into the room, sat down on the patched-up couch and her curiosity matched Owen's. She leaned over his shoulder and stared at the shockingly bright green envelope.

Owen proceeded to carefully open it in case it contained something of great importance. He discovered a letter inside on unusually thick paper that seemed as exotic as it must have been expensive. The font was odd and seemed similar to a gothic blackletter font, almost regal in nature. Owen proceeded to read the letter aloud to his mother:

"Dear Owen: It has come to our attention that you are an incredibly academically gifted student and we would like to invite you to take part in the Boston Gifted Scholars Mystery Challenge. We hope that you will accept our invitation to hike from your home in western Massachusetts to Boston between November 5 and November 11, 2022. You will be one of 7 young adults who we have selected who are each roughly equidistant from the final destination although none of you will know what the destination is until you start the journey and use the clues along the way.

To aid you in this challenge, you need to be observant along the way for clues that will help guide you to the final destination, which is approximately 146 miles to the east of your home. Included with this letter is a compass and a map of Massachusetts to help you plan your journey. Your strong characteristics of determination and fearlessness will carry you through what can be a very difficult experience at times.

The objective is to use clues along your path that will reveal the exact final destination and to reach this

place before your competition. The reward for winning this challenge is an all-expenses-paid, full-four-year scholarship to any college within the Boston area that you have a strong interest in attending. Please accept this challenge and begin preparing for what will be the most exciting journey of your life. Although your parents or guardians may help you start your journey, you must traverse most of it by yourself.

Best Wishes,

An Anonymous Benefactor”

Owen was ecstatic because this was a huge opportunity for him to attend college despite his family’s financial difficulties. Before Owen did anything, he felt that he must ask his mother what she thought. "What do you think of the letter, mom?" he asked.

"This is unbelievable, Owen!" she exclaimed with more zeal than Owen. Then, her face hardened with confusion, doubt, and concern. "How do we know this is safe? Why is the benefactor anonymous? Why must you do this by yourself?"

"Mom, I have been worried that I may need to do my first two years of university at the local community college. This could be my ticket to apply to any college I want then attend for free. I will be safe. If anything goes wrong, I will call you immediately. May I please leave then?" Owen inquired, hoping that his mother would agree with him. Owen's mother appeared to be deliberating with herself before cautiously saying, "Ye-es, of course you can, son," with severe hesitation. "But only if you plan ahead of time; this appears to be something that might go very wrong if you do not take certain precautions and plan your travels accordingly," she stated emphatically.

"Of course, mom," Owen replied quickly before changing her mind. Owen and his mother barely had a day and a half to prepare for the Gifted Scholars Walking Challenge because it was November 3rd.

Owen and his mother decided to closely examine the map to see if there was anything that could aid them in their planning and discussed how he could look for clues. They noticed on the provided map that there was a dark red pen circle over an inn that was 26 miles away from their home. Owen and his mother concluded that traveling 25 miles or so each day would be the most practical way for him to cover the 146 miles in a week. Given Owen was a relatively experienced bike rider, this seemed reasonable. Owen then said to his mom that his expectation was that there would be clues at the inn that dictated his next destination. He also promised his mom that if he could not figure out where to go next that he would call her and come home. They were anxious, though, because there were no other clues pointing them in the right direction other than the marked inn. They were also concerned about the weather. Multiple weather reports had told them that the temperature would be in the single digits during the challenge week. They were not going to be deterred by the cold weather given this offer could help them solve their financial concerns regarding college.

They needed to start packing, as it was the night before the start of the challenge. Owen had to mentally prepare himself as well, as this was a difficult assignment for him because he had no idea what to anticipate. They decided to use Owen's weather-beaten school backpack for the journey ahead. They put his own clothes, supplies, a cheap watch, \$500 in twenties, a pocket knife, and other belongings, including a pair of gloves and a hat, tucked snugly away in his backpack. Owen's mother also felt that it would be smart to also pack the compass and the map of Massachusetts in case he got lost or if there was an emergency. "Mom, what will you do when I leave?" Will you be able to manage without me?" he asked caringly. Owen was very excited about competing in the challenge, but he did not want to leave his mom alone.

"Well, Owen, I think I can handle life without you for one week, and of course you should compete. We didn't spend a day planning just for you to give up," she responded supportively.

"But..."

"But nothing; you shouldn't dawdle any longer; it's almost 12 o'clock; you should get going. But if there is any problem, call me or just come home!" she interjected before he could respond. Owen and his mother said their goodbyes, knowing that they would not see each other for a whole week. Owen began to ride his bike away from his house, knowing that this journey was just beginning. Given the cold weather and the long trip, Owen decided to peddle at a relatively slow pace because the frozen air was already biting at his face even though he had just started the journey.

It had been several hours since Owen had left the house; he had only traversed 15 or so miles in the last few hours. Moreover, the trail had become quite rocky. Given the cold air gnawing on his face and the bumpy uneven dirt path, Owen got off his bike. He pushed his bike and walked along the Sito Trail then the sun had started to set on the horizon, and he knew that this would be a long walk to get those next 11 miles done. Although it was warmer now than it was when he started his journey, the chilling wind was just as strong. His heart was pounding, and his body was shaking from the cold. Although he wore gloves, he checked his fingers because he could not feel them and saw that they were a pinkish hue. He cracked his knuckles to make sure he could still move his fingers and after several cracks that sounded like a bubble envelope popping, he felt his hands were capable of more mobility than he

had feared. But the thought of having the opportunity to win an all-expenses-paid scholarship made him feel reinvigorated. Owen tried to think warm thoughts, as he hoped that these images and feelings would help him counteract the biting frost, but this did not do much to help him. He felt lonely too but forced himself to recall that there were people who cared about him and this journey would not only help him but his mom as well who had struggled to provide for him since his father passed away. These thoughts did fuel his inner passions and he noticed the cold weather less. Owen felt lonely for another hour or so until he saw a woman most likely no older than his mom then he approached her to ask if she could help him out.

"Excuse me, my name is Owen. Do you know if there is a bus or anything that could get me to the Box Trail Inn, near Sito Town Beach? I did not expect it to be so cold and rocky," he asked somewhat desperately and his voice cracked a few times during his question. He noticed the woman had piercing eyes that did not blink. Her gaze was fixed on him.

"Oh, my name is Ana, and yes, I do, but the nearest bus station is a couple of miles away from where we are. Would you like it if I were to give you a ride? You could put your bike on the back of my car" she said smiling, almost beaming. Owen noticed her teeth were yellow and misshaped and chipped.

"Thank you! That would be fantastic," Owen responded.

"Great, my car is only a short distance away. Follow me," said Ana. Owen and Ana began to walk towards Ana's car until Ana questioned, "What's a boy as young as you doing out here going to a place as far away as Sito?"

Owen, thinking that he could trust her, responded, "Oh, I am in a competition."

"Oh, that sounds fun. Tell me more about it, my car right over there," Ana gesturing over just past the small hill. Ana's car was a weathered, dark gray Hyundai SUV with multiple dents and scratches on the outside and a broken bumper. On the inside of the car, there were several used water bottles and soda cans with red-stained tissues on the floor. Given the car's poor condition and state of it, Owen found himself wondering if she struggled as much financially as he and his mom did, and he could not help but feel sorry for her.

Owen asked, "Sorry, what's the deal with these napkins? Is that um...?"

Ana chuckled and said, "Oh isn't that gross. Sorry about that. I had a nose bleed earlier today. The damned cold dry air around here, know what I mean?"

"So, as you were saying earlier, what is this competition? I would assume that there is some amazing prize for you to be going that far," she said curiously.

"Oh, it's nothing; please, I do not want to waste your time," Owen responded, not knowing if he was supposed to inform anyone else about the competition. Moreover, he felt increasingly uneasy about this woman.

"That's quite all right," she said understandingly.

They hooked up his bike to the back of the car and sat in the car. Owen expected to feel warmer in the car but the inside of the car was as cold as the outside. It seemed like the car had been parked there for a while. Owen was feeling increasingly tense.

Given the tension and struggling to find a conversation topic, Owen then asked, "What are you doing out here though?" Then Owen sneezed violently. Ana gave him a clean tissue and said her blow in this. The tissue smelled a little funny and Owen looked at Ana. She said, "Oh come now...you have snot everything. The tissue's anti-bacterial so it has a little smell and taste." Owen blew his nose and did not think much about it.

Ana turned on the car, and her once focused eyes went into a glassy daze as she seemed to take in the horizon. "I live 20 minutes away from the Sito Trail," Ana responded, not really answering his question.

"That's nice," Owen said confused, realizing she had dismissed his question. Then, Owen found himself looking out over the horizon too and felt that the trail was quite beautiful and would be much nicer to walk on when the weather was warmer. The car began to warm up. Owen started to feel much more relaxed. He thought this must be because of the long amount of time he had been traveling in the cold but now feeling warm in the car. Then, Owen felt himself dozing off then went in a deep sleep.

Owen awoke in a daze, checking his watch to see that nearly an hour had passed and they had still not arrived at Sito. Owen had begun to be a tad bit suspicious as they had been driving far longer than necessary. He also noticed that they were in the middle of a boundless forest. Beyond that, he had a throbbing headache and his hands felt like anvils that were too heavy to lift. Much to his confusion, he asked, "Umm, excuse me, Ana, are you sure that we are driving the right way?"

"Yes, I'm sure; where are we now anyways?" Ana responded uncannily as she parked the car.

"Ok, Ana," Owen said confused but while part of his mind was increasingly concerned, the rest of his body was not responding normally, almost like it was still asleep.

"You know, Owen, my son is also in the exact same walking competition as you," Ana said nonchalantly.

"Wait, what?" Owen said right before Ana turned around and swung her fists at him. Owen could barely move and narrowly dodged her first punch, grabbed his backpack, and tried to run out of the dark gray Hyundai SUV into the

endless forest. He did not think about his bike that had been attached to her car. Owen heard Ana exit her car, so he continued to run. He ran for another 10 minutes until he was sure that he had strayed far enough away from Ana. Exhausted and panic-stricken, Owen felt very woozy and sat down on the side of a tree to collect his thoughts.

Owen was now lost in the middle of a ceaseless forest in frigid weather and it was very dark now and the forest was silent, almost anticipating something bad was about to happen. "What will I do?" he thought to himself again and again. The pressure began to cave in on Owen, and he felt as though he could no longer continue and just wanted to go back to his rickety old house.

After feeling remorseful for a moment, he remembered the reward of the all-expenses-paid scholarship and how proud his mom would be if he succeeded in this walking competition. Owen started to calm down, took his map out of his backpack, and began to stroll around the forest in search of any possible landmarks that may show him his ongoing location. After 25 minutes of searching, Owen figured out that he was actually only 3 miles away from the Sito bus station and that he was currently in Shallot Forest. Owen figured that he had dawdled for long enough and started walking. From then on, he would not trust anyone on his journey.

Maizie Ferguson

Age: 15, Grade: 11

Home School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Jennifer Ferguson

Category: Short Story

The Christmas Miracle

Introduction

7 February, 1989

Diary, it has always fascinated me so how people– all of us members of the race of mankind– can be so alike, yet be so far apart. Who knows, there may be someone out there who holds my same ideals, and idolizes the same authors, and can't imagine a life without music. They might even be named Sofie, too. Maybe we'll never meet, maybe we will. Maybe it'll take a catastrophic event to bring us together... I hope not. It took a whole war for Opa to meet that someone like him. And it took a whole forty-nine years until they were able to meet again, brought together through the newspaper. I can't even imagine what it was like the day they met. They were both barely older than I was, my senior by a mere two years. I shudder at the thought of my dear, dear Opa, young, in the bloody throes of the battlefield. Yet he was there. At least he's found Arthur Murray, even if it is so many years later. Praise the Lord for their chance meeting! Until the next – Sofie

Part I

The Beginning, July, 1914

Nettie, there is a war coming. I feel it in my soul, and even you, sister, can't make me think otherwise. With the assassination of the Serbian archduke and the tensions over there coming to a head... there is nothing but war on the horizon. I know it doesn't affect you much, but I can't help but worry about the family. You won't be back for some time, but I'm practically a man, Net. If it does come to war, I'll either be drafted or enlist myself. I wish you were here. You could help me with all that I feel roiling inside of me, much like those countries' feelings bubbling up to the surface. What would mum and da do if they were still here? What should I do? Can I just leave the children with Aunt Violet and Uncle Harris? Or is that abandonment? I don't know what to do, sister. God bless you! Your brother, Artie

My dear brother. All that you feel is completely natural. I think of you all day and night, Artie. I am proud of my George for his work here in India, but it is at times like this that I would wish for nothing more than to be home with you, auntie, uncle, and Susan and Louise and Henry and the dear babies. But if Britain and the Crown require you, though, I would suggest you take up arms. You are but a child, so I would not suggest you willingly enlist, but should our country need you, I will feel much joy in my heart that such a faithful, wonderful young man such as yourself will be protecting our nation and its people. Oh, dear boy, I wish I could remember father and the Boer war more so I could advise you. But alas I can only provide comfort from afar. Follow your heart's compass, as cliché as that sounds, and always take the Word of the Lord as your guide. Never lose your humility and heart for humanity. I pray for you all continually. If you could lift up the Bassu family in your prayers, I would so appreciate it. They are contemplating conversion! Love you richly, Net

Part II

Lamb to Slaughter, August, 1914

Liebe Mutter,

Ich denke Tag und Nacht an dich. Ihr seid immer in Meinen Gebeten. Gebt Papa und Liesva und den Kindern meine Liebe. Gott sei mit dir–

Karl

I'm not sure what to think. Of course I want to take up arms and bear them for my country. But why, then, does it feel so wrong? Will I ever see my family again? As the trains lead me farther and farther away from Cochem, my heart sinks to my stomach. The soldiers surrounding me are young, too. Some, like Hanz and Friedrich I know from home. O, Lord, I pray keep my family safe and all of us who will fight under your wings.

Liebe Mutter,

Wir sind an der Front angelangt. aber ich bin in Sicherheit. Gib Papa, Liesva und den Kindern meine Liebe.

Gott segne–

Karl

Already there is not enough to eat. I am more scared than I ever have been. The constant sound of gunfire rings in my ears. Fredriech is dead. One of the first to perish. I wrote to his mother on his behalf, but could hardly write the words. I know she will receive a telegram from the government, but that is hardly a caring message. I thought she deserved to know, from someone who personally knew her son, what... happened. I know now why my Opa resented my enlistment. War is death and evil.

Liebe Mutter. Hanz ist krank. Es geht mir gut. Liebe an alle– Karl

Part III

Heart of Lead, November, 1918

Mir fehlen die Worte. That is all that can be said. Four years since the start of this war, and now, finally, it is over. Germans are disgraced. O, Lord, why have you forsaken us? Of course, I sing for the bloodbath is ended. If Mutter were here, she would take up her voice in song. "The Lord Reigneth", as it would be in English, came into my mind.

"Wohlauf, ihr Heiden, lasset das Trauern sein,

zur grünen Weiden stellet euch willig ein;

da lässt er uns sein Wort verkünden,

machet uns ledig von allen Sünden."

It seems sacrilegious to translate my mother tongue, but in the darkness, lit by one candle, I did. I have nothing against the English. I'd be taken as traitor if someone read that, but it is true. I am not like those patriotic men who groom their moustaches like the Kaiser's, and hate anyone who opposes our country. But it is not the common man, those soldiers situated across no-man's land, that are the enemy. 'Tis the leaders who are at fault. We are only pawns in a great game of chance. A game of chance and death and catch and release. O my soul!

Somehow I've taken up writing through these years. Releasing one's thoughts by pen brings untold peace and

comfort, almost the same as if you speak unto a friend. I can imagine my family, paint pictures of them by my pen.

How they have grown since I left. How I long to see them– and will see them soon. The thought! How many times during the brutality have I wondered if I would see them again? Waves of nausea still take hold of me when I bring to mind the thousands of soldiers who will never make it back. For the mutters and their families who have lost their sons. And my heart also bleeds for the soldiers who have survived, only to find that their family members have perished. Who, then, will comfort them when they awake, screaming in the night? What, then, was the point of their service?

"Rise then, ye nations, cast off your mournfulness;

into His pastures will ye not gladly press?

For there His Word abroad is sounded,

pardon for sinners, and grace unbounded."

Thank the Lord for the end to this war. If only I knew what comes next. For myself, my family, my brethren, fellow Germans, for the country itself, and for our world.

Part IV

Shadowlands, February, 1919

I awake in the depth of the inky darkness, a thin layer of chilling sweat enveloping me as if it were my skin. Whilst I slept, wraith-like hands, memories of desolate times past encircled my entire body, suffocating me. I rose from the bed to find the grey quilt on the floor. There is nothing to do now but to light a candle and take up my old ink pen.

My childhood, unjustly ripped from me with an ugly, ill-timed thrust into the world of man. Oh, what a continuous wrenching, gasping, reaching time of death it was, with grime streaked down the face, blood crusted beneath the fingernails, and a pang, an ache for home so strong it threatened to consume even the most able-bodied man.

Hate— that most vile of evils, that sin so strong— hovered ever near. Even I, one who prided himself throughout his youth on a clean conscience and devotion to all that was good, was not left untouched by the hand of the devil. War does that to you. War alters the features so that what once was known becomes foreign. Not only does the horror that is war steal limbs and lives, but it also pillages innocence, religion, love, trust.

All of humanity suffers as a result of warfare. On earth, as well as in heaven, for I know it troubles our Lord deeply when His beloved children resort to large-scale murder and strategized demolition of body, town, and spirit instead of civilized communication.

I still feel not unlike Judas Escariot, that most dreadful of traitors. Of course, in the midst of the chaos I protected the Crown with the whole of my being, but I can't help but remember that one day of peace... it became a horrid battle within myself each day after that... for it was then that I knew just who I fought against. The men I shot, what lives and talents and families I demolished. I was a traitor against my own race, those fellow children of our Creator, my brethren. I cannot write more now; My heart bleeds.

Twenty-two years, yet from the dull aches I feel I could be eighty. I sleep no more this night.

Part V

Ehre sei Gott, October, 1988

Beams of rare, autumn sunlight, sending motes of dust dancing and twisting aloft, veritably streamed through the window onto the late breakfast table. Karl Ambros Thalberg, recently turned 81, an avid bird-watcher, chess-player, chocolate-eater, and a World War I veteran, sat amiably, bent over the newspaper. It had been six years now since he had left Germany to come live with his son and his family in England.

Karl typically did not read the paper for length and information, instead preferring a disengaged, leisurely perusal. But on this day, a headline caught his eye. Of course he'd misplaced his glasses again, so he called for his youngest granddaughter, Sofie, who, more often than not, knew where his sneaky spectacles had gone. He lost, she found.

“Sofie? Kätzchen?”

The sound of feet coming down the stairs. “Opa? Where—”

“Kitchen,” he replied before taking a distasteful sip of tea. Oh, tea. The poor English.

Sofie appeared in the doorway. She was a tall girl of fifteen, with vast, uncontrollable chesnut curls and a smile that made Karl's heart ache for his mother as the girl grew. Clutched in her hand were her grandfather's round glasses. Karl chuckled.

“Your glasses?” Sofie grinned and placed them on her grandfather's head. “There we are. How you lose them every day, Opa, I cannot guess. You have misplacing magic!”

Sofie sat and fixed herself a cup of tea, and the kitchen elapsed into an amiable silence.

“Lieber Himmel!” Karl dropped the paper to the table.

“Opa?” Sofie was at his side in an instant, her hand over her grandfathers'.

“Who— who wrote this article, Kätzchen?” Karl removed his glasses and ran shaking fingers through the scant curls that still clung to his head.

Sofie grabbed the paper and scanned hastily. “It appears to be written by Arthur Murray. A guest appearance by one of their retired writers.”

“Mein Gott. *Arthur Murray*.” Karl's eyes were far away.

“O—Opa?” When she received no response, Sofie tore from the room. “Mum! Mum! Come, please, it's Opa!”

~~~~

“Da?”

Arthur Murray, retired newspaper journalist, purveyor of jigsaws, lover of the work of C.S. Lewis, and quite fond of trifle, sat in front of the computer, mumbling to himself. The whippersnappers over at *The Finch* had sent it. Jane smiled to herself. As if Arthur couldn't pick up on her glee at being in the presence of such a machine. Jane was a

good girl, living with her old Da, but Arthur was less than pleased with the new installment and munched halfheartedly on a biscuit, leftover from their tea a few hours earlier.

“Want me to turn it on for you?”

“I know Neville was trying to be nice, but I don’t *need* a computer,” Arthur grumped.

“It’ll be so much easier for your writing, Da! Just think! It’ll bring you into the new world of word processing technology—”

“Which I’d rather let alone. My typewriter has never left me wanting for something more, and if it did, I do still have hands, Janey.”

Jane laughed. “Neville phoned and said someone had sent you an email. An email, Da! You’re a celebrity. He knows because they’ve already set everything up, and they even enclosed your new email address at the bottom of your article.” Jane powered on the computer, quite enthralled. “See, just a bit of loading to do.”

A few minutes later, after opening the World Wide Web, Jane presented a message inbox, beaming. “Look, Da! It’s from a Sofie Thalberg... on behalf of her grandfather. They’re writing because of your last article in *The Finch!* Want me to read it for you?”

“If you must, you must,” Arthur said, waving a blue-veined hand.

“Dear Mr. Murray. My name is Sofie Thalberg, and my grandfather just read your article entitled “The Christmas Miracle”. It touched him greatly, because, you see, he was there. On the German side. He tells me that he was seventeen years old, and, most importantly, sir, he says you were there, too. He believes he met you, back in 1914. He lives at 423 Ashbury Lane (which is my address, as well). He would, if you would be so willing, like to see you. He understands if you would rather not. Your words touched me, as well, Mr. Murray. I do hope you consider a meeting. Oh, and his name. That is something important to enclose. My opa’s name is Karl Thalberg. Yours— Sofie.”

“Karl Thalberg. My word, I never thought I’d hear his name again,” Arthur said.

“So it’s true, Da? You met him?”

Arthur swallowed, then licked his thin lips. “Yes. I did. Janey, I want to see him.”

Jane placed a hand on her father’s arm. “I’ll write Sofie back. You’ll see him.”

~~~~

Four days later, at The Apple and Orange pub, if you would happen to look through the front window, you would see two old men sitting at a table. Their hands gnarled from years of hard work, their faces lined with worry and joy and life, and backs stooped. Yet they grinned and chattered like the young boys they once were. Tears streamed down both their faces, and they exchanged letters and mementos and stories and memories. Did they remember each other? Of course they did... how could they possibly forget! That night of miracles, that Christmas truce full of carols and tales and humanity and love had stayed with them through the rest of the war and the rest of their lives.

Das Ende.

Josiah Harrison

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway Southwest Middle School, Manchester, MO

Educator: Julia Harrison

Category: Novel Writing

We're Just Friends

Brief summary:

We're Just Friends is about a boy and a girl, James Carrelli and Makayla Emerson. After years of being friends, James realizes he has a crush on her but keeps it bottled up. In high school, James and Makayla are closer than ever, and he wants to tell her how he feels, but he is worried that she'll not feel the same and it will ruin their friendship. He can't imagine not having her to talk to anymore and he can't stand the idea that things might get awkward. So, he doesn't ask her out, which causes a whole series of events and miscommunications to occur which might just tear them apart. James and Makayla's story is complicated. But they just might be able to find a way to make things work.

Excerpt:

Chapter 1: The Friends

I was sound asleep, dreaming about ace-ing my upcoming science test when someone started knocking loudly on my bedroom door. I knew at once it was my brother. I tried putting a pillow over my head, but it didn't help. "Oh my God!"

"James!" Maddox screamed.

"Go away, Maddox," I mumbled from bed.

"James, it's important," Maddox demanded.

"What could you possibly need or want?" I asked.

"We need to show you something."

"What?" I walked to the door and opened it. Maddox was standing there. With a Big Gulp cup in his hand. Before I could duck, Maddox splashed the cup of water in my face and ran off laughing.

"Get back here!" I screamed. I chased Maddox down the stairs and, in the effort of escaping, Maddox slipped and fell down the stairs. I jumped down the stairs and grabbed him by the shirt, but he was still laughing. I put him down and stomped back up the stairs, flicking him off.

"Awwww, James is using a bad gesture!" Maddox whined, trying to get me in trouble.

"Shut up, asshole," I shouted.

"Hey, quit it," Dana snapped. Our older sister appeared like a ninja whenever I said a bad word.

"Both of you!"

"Tell that to the douchebag at the bottom of the steps. All I did was chase him for throwing water on me while I was still asleep." I bellowed.

"James. Maddox. Apologize to each other right now. We're going to see mom after school, so if you two can't figure this out, you're gonna have to explain to her what's going on." Dana looked at both of us and Maddox was still smiling. I wanted to run over and do something to get him back, but I couldn't think of anything. Yet.

"Apologize or deal with mom," Dana ordered.

"I'm sorry James."

"I'm sorry, too, Maddox," I said.

"Good. Now let's just try to get through the day, okay?" Dana holds us together.

“Okay,” Maddox said.

“I’ll try,” I said, rolling my eyes at Maddox.

“So what time are we going to the rehab center tonight?” Maddox asked.

Hearing *rehab* makes me feel weird. Especially with the context of it in this conversation, why we have to go to the rehab center.

“I’ll pick Maddox up from school and we’ll head over about 5:00,” Dana replied.

“Okay,” Maddox muttered as he slurped down the milk from his cereal bowl.

A few minutes later, Dana, Maddox and I walked outside to her car. She unlocked the doors and we got in. Dana always dropped me off first and then took Maddox to his school, some private school, ESFUAD. I don’t know what it stands for, but he calls it Excellence Academy, which makes sense because Maddox is super smart.

My brother glared out the window at me, making an exaggerated angry face. As I was walking into the school, I felt my heart speed up. Something was wrong. I had a feeling that something was about to happen.

Next thing I knew, I felt a backpack slam into the side of my head. I fell to the ground and looked up. It was Leonard. This was not turning out to be my best day.

“What’s up Carrelli?” Leonard jeered. “Ready for an ass-kicking?”

“Not feeling like an ass-kicking, douchebag, but what’s up with you?” I had a big mouth, so ass-kicking was a major part of my daily routine. He grabbed my shirt and slammed me into the lockers.

“Listen here, asshole, if you talk to my girlfriend...no, if you even look at her again, I will your life a living, miserable hell.”

“You are mistaken. I’m already in hell. Just looking at your face is a one-way ticket there.” I laughed.

Leonard clinched his fists and raised his arm. He looked at me with fire in his eyes and he almost punched me, but Makayla walked up and pushed him, and he stumbled back towards the lockers. Leonard’s friend Richard was standing just behind Makayla and was trying not to laugh.

“Go to class, Leonard,” Makayla snapped.

“Ugh, fine.” Leonard looked dead at me. “This isn’t finished.”

I looked back at him and smiled. I flicked him off as his friend Richard pulled him back from coming to attack me again.

“James, what have I talked to you about a million times? Don’t start fights you can’t finish, especially with him,” Makayla urged.

“Well, if someone decides that they can walk all over me, I’m gonna show them I’m not someone you can treat like garbage,” I replied.

“Fair point, but still. One day, you and your sarcastic quips are going to get you the beating of a lifetime,” Makayla warned. “And I may not be around to protect you.”

Eliana joined me and Makayla and Aaron grabbed my backpack and pulled me backward. “Hey lovebirds,” he said.

I almost fell to the ground.

“Was that necessary?” I asked. “Everybody is messing with me today.”

“Yes, James. It was,” Aaron laughed.

“For the record, we’re not lovebirds. We’re just friends.” I looked over at Makayla.

“Yeah, we’re just friends.” Makayla said.

“Well, that’s not what Leonard thinks. And anyway, it was still funny,” Aaron grinned and Eliana gave him a look. “What? I’m only joking.”

“Ha ha. Very funny,” Eliana said, sarcastically.

“Thanks. My mother says I’m funny all the time too,” Aaron said. He puffed out his chest like he was all that.

“Yeah. Funny *looking*,” I said.

“To go back to the topic of moms, how’s your mom, James?” Makayla asked.

“She’s doing better. I haven’t seen her this week, but I’m going after school today,” I replied.

“Wait, sorry I’m late to a lot of this. What’s going on with your mom?” Aaron asked.

“No one tells me anything.”

“She was diagnosed with MS a few years ago, but she had a major flare up about two months ago, so she’s been in a rehab center to help her re-learn skills and get her strength back. Dana’s been staying at the house with us since then, so we’re not all alone,” I said.

“That’s a real pain in the ass. I’m sorry dude,” Aaron said, looking down at his feet.

I patted his shoulder. “Nah man. It’s all good. She wasn’t able to walk or even feed herself at first. She’s been really doing with her occupational and physical therapy, so if we’re lucky, she’ll maybe get to come back home soon.”

“Well, tell her I say hi,” said Makayla.

“Yeah, I will.”

There was a quiet pause between us after that, and Eliana gave me a look. I looked away like I always do.

We all walked to our classes, but Makayla, Eliana and I all had World History first hour. One of my least favorite classes, but it wasn’t *the* worst because I had Makayla in there to always make me laugh and enjoy the class. We walked in and sat down. Eliana sat at the table right behind me and Makayla sat on the other side of my table, facing me. She and I would always play games with each other, like staring contests, rock-paper-scissors, and once we mimicked each other and did the same movements. I always lost. It’s what we did the whole class time and we didn’t get much done. I’ve had a few of my best moments in that class. She’s my best friend. I’ve been friends with her for what feels like forever, but it’s only been a couple of years. Makayla took a deep breath. “Wait, what are we supposed to be doing?”

“We have to write an essay about Ancient Egypt, like geography, social structure, religions, and origin of the country,” I said, reading from the smart board.

“Oh, alright. Thanks,” Makayla said, and she reached into her backpack and grabbed a pencil and her notebook. She placed the tip of her pencil on the paper and began to write. My eyes widened at the fact that she already knew what she was going to write. I was amazed. I got to my own writing and she saw me and smirked. When I looked over again, she grabbed my paper and swapped it with hers. She tricked me. She began to laugh, and I smiled. I tried to grab my paper back, but she swatted my hand away. She used to do this a lot, but since we didn’t have any other classes together, we stopped. It felt nice to get back into it.

I looked at her paper and thought it was blank, until I noticed a tiny little sketch at the top of the page. I said, “What is this? Because this doesn’t look like schoolwork to me.”

“I couldn’t think of anything about Egypt, so I just drew a baby Yoda,” she laughed.

“Oh, I see.”

“Alright, I don’t know where to start. I need help, or I’m gonna start drawing Yoda as a cowboy.”

“What are you gonna call him?” I asked.

“Yoda-lay hee hoo.”

I laughed so hard I nearly fell out of my chair. “Oh my gosh! That is the greatest name ever!”

Makayla pursed her lips and cocked her head to the side, then said, “I know. I’m just amazing like that.” She smiled and looked back at the teacher, who was sitting at her desk with a couple of students around her.

After school, I walked home. I would normally take the bus, but today I just needed to walk. It gave me some quiet time to think about seeing mom.

When I got home, Dana was gone, picking up Maddox, I guessed. I figured I would have about 45 minutes before they got home. I turned on *The Flash*. I’ve seen it probably a hundred times, but it’s so good. I was currently on season 8, episode 12. Throughout the episode, I watched my phone, waiting. For what? I have no idea. A text? From whom?

From *her*?

I must’ve fallen asleep because suddenly the front door burst open and all I heard was Maddox stomping around and Dana yelling at him, “Knock it off,” she said.

“Ugh, Maddox! Go take a shower!” I yelled. “I can smell you from here.”

“Go to hell!” he screamed from the stairs. This was usual. Seeing mom makes us all anxious.

I was a little pissed off when he told me to go to hell until I heard him pull off his shirt

and make a puking noise. “Oh my God! I do stink.”

I laughed as he shut the bathroom door, risking death from his own stench. I closed my eyes for a few more minutes, waiting for the others.

Maddox jumped down the stairs two at a time and Dana grabbed her purse and her keys from the hook by the door. “Alright boys, let’s go.”

I got up and grabbed my phone and Air Pods. We drove to the rehab center in silence. It wasn’t a long drive. We’re only ten minutes away. I just listened to my music.

When we arrived, my heart started pounding, very quickly, speeding with each step towards the entrance. When I got to the front door, I stopped in front of the glass doors and looked right through, into the lobby.

“It’s OK, James. I’m right here,” Dana reassured me.

We walked up to the lady who sits behind the counter. I guess the receptionist of the rehab center of sorts. I don’t know much about hospitals and nursing homes and stuff.

“Hello,” Dana said. She is cool. “We’re the Carelli’s. We’re here to see Marilyn.”

“Ok. We moved Marilyn to a different room. She’s now in room 1008.” She pointed off to her right. “Go straight down that hall and turn left. Her room is two doors down.”

“Thank you,” Dana said. We walked down the hallway, following the directions the clerk gave us. I stopped, staring down at the second door on the left. As I stood in the middle of the hallway, the walls began to stretch and move in various ways. I felt woozy and sick. I couldn’t do this. I can’t do this, I thought to myself. I tried coming up with ways to escape, ways to get out of this.

“It’s OK, James,” Dana repeated. “I’m right here.”

“We got this, James. If I can do this, you can too,” Maddox said.

I walked forward and held both Dana and Maddox’s hands. We walked closer and closer to the door. We stood right in front of it and Dana opened it slowly. I saw mom in her hospital bed. Her hair was pulled back and in a scarf. She looked pale in the hospital gown and skinny as hell. I was saddened by the sight of her there. It hurt so much to see her like that, but I couldn’t leave.

“Hi, my babies,” she said in a voice almost a whisper.

“Hi, Mom,” we all said in unison.

“How are...” she started but she began to cough hard, like her lungs would just pop out of her. She grabbed the water on the table next to the bed to clear her throat, but she dropped the cup.

Dana ran over to the bed. “Oh shi—shoot! Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll get you some more water.”

Dana went to the fridge and got another bottle of water and grabbed a towel from the bathroom on her way back. She gave the water to mom and cleaned up the puddle on the ground. I’ve never heard Dana almost curse. It surprised me.

“Are you OK?” Maddox asked.

“Ye-yes. I’m doing better,” mom said. “Just got to get rid of this cough. How are you guys?”

“I’m doing great,” Maddox said.

“I’m good,” Dana said. “Finals are next week.”

Mom looked at me, waiting for my answer.

I looked at Dana and Maddox. “I’m OK.”

“Well, good. How’s your grades?”

I smiled. “All A’s.”

Maddox nodded. “Same,” he said. “Except for one B, but I’m gonna bring it up when I turn in my last project.”

“That’s great,” Mom said. “I’m so proud of you all. What else am I missing, trapped in here?”

Dana said, “Me and Kelly have been doing amazing. I think I love her.”

“That’s amazing, Dana. That’s amazing. Do I hear wedding bells?” Dana laughed. “I’ll give you my grandmother’s ring.”

“Haha, no not yet, mom,” Dana smiled. She looked down at the floor, avoiding eye contact. “I wish you were there with us,” Dana began to cry a little and, to be honest, so did I. Maddox was still smiling. Not in a bad way. He just chooses to be happy and hyper at all times.

“Me too, honey. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.” She was just saying that so that Maddox didn’t worry, but Dana and I shot a look at each other and back at mom. She could get better, but it’s not getting any better right now. The door to her room opened and an aide carried in a tray with her dinner. Dana helped get mom propped up and ready to eat. She buttered her bread and sat at the end of her bed. To be honest, it didn’t smell very good, but mom seemed to enjoy it. We sat for about another hour, talking about pretty much nothing. Mom yawned and Dana stood up.

“OK, boys. We better head out and let Mom rest.”

Maddox and I stood up and at the same time said, “Love you, Mom.”

“I love you too,” she replied.

Dana and Maddox gave her a hug and headed towards the door. I gave mom a hug and stood by her for another second.

“Oh James. I know it’s been tougher for you than for the other two, but it’s OK for you to be happy. I don’t want to see you so sad every time you come visit.”

“I’m sorry Mom. It’s just that it doesn’t seem fair. I hate seeing you in pain. You shouldn’t have to go through all this.” Tears were streaming down my face.

“It’s OK. It will get better.”

“But you don’t know that,” I said.

“Look,” Mom said. “I know this is hard. But you are the man of the family and I need you to be strong for me, Dana, and Maddox. We need you as much as you need all of us. Together. That’s the only way to do this, OK?”

“OK, Mom. I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too, James. “Text me if you need to talk. About anything.” She squeezed my hand.

“Alright.” I walked out the door and Dana, Maddox and I walked out of the hospital and got into the car. We all exhaled together and stayed quiet as Dana drove us home. I stared out the window.

On the way home, I felt a buzz in my pocket. I pulled out my phone and saw that Makayla texted me.

Makayla: Hey, I finished my official drawing of Yoda-lay hee hoo

Makayla: *Attachment: 1 Image*

I opened the image and when I saw her “creation” I thought of texting back, and I don’t know why, but I took my finger off the keyboard and turned off my phone. I went back to staring out of the car window, watching everything pass by in seconds. I chuckled at the drawing quietly. I had this weird surge of happiness through my whole body.

What the hell? I thought.

I looked around and felt calm almost immediately. I smiled and thought about something that people say or think about at school.

Do I like Makayla Emerson?

We're Just Friends

Chapter 1: The Friends

I was sound asleep, dreaming about ace-ing my upcoming science test when someone started knocking loudly on my bedroom door. I knew at once it was my brother. I tried putting a pillow over my head, but it didn't help. "Oh my God!"

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“Tell that to the douchebag at the bottom of the steps. All I did was chase him for throwing water on me while I was still asleep.” I bellowed.

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“Apologize or deal with mom,” Dana ordered.

“I’m sorry James.”

“I’m sorry, too, Maddox,” I said.

“Good. Now let’s just try to get through the day, okay?” Dana holds us together.

“Okay,” Maddox said.

“I’ll try,” I said, rolling my eyes at Maddox.

“So what time are we going to the rehab center tonight?” Maddox asked.

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conversation, why we have to go to the rehab center.

“I’ll pick Maddox up from school and we’ll head over about 5:00,” Dana replied.

“Okay,” Maddox muttered as he slurped down the milk from his cereal bowl.

A few minutes later, Dana, Maddox and I walked outside to her car. She unlocked the doors and we got in. Dana always dropped me off first and then took Maddox to his school, some private school, ESFUAD. I don’t know what it stands for, but he calls it Excellence Academy, which makes sense because Maddox is super smart.

My brother glared out the window at me, making an exaggerated angry face. As I was walking into the school, I felt my heart speed up. Something was wrong. I had a feeling that something was about to happen.

Next thing I knew, I felt a backpack slam into the side of my head. I fell to the ground and looked up. It was Leonard. This was not turning out to be my best day.

“What’s up Carrelli?” Leonard jeered. “Ready for an ass-kicking?”

“Not feeling like an ass-kicking, douchebag, but what’s up with you?” I had a big mouth, so ass-kicking was a major part of my daily routine. He grabbed my shirt and slammed me into the lockers.

“Listen here, asshole, if you talk to my girlfriend...no, if you even look at her again, I will

your life a living, miserable hell.”

“You are mistaken. I’m already in hell. Just looking at your face is a one-way ticket there.” I laughed.

“You think this is funny?” Leonard shouted. “I bet your face being bloody will be really funny, huh?”

“Meh. I’ve dealt with worse,” I said.

Leonard clinched his fists and raised his arm. He looked at me with fire in his eyes and he almost punched me, but Makayla walked up and pushed him, and he stumbled back towards the lockers. Leonard’s friend Richard was standing just behind Makayla and was trying not to laugh.

“Hey, what the hell?” Leonard looked at me, and then at Makayla confused. “Get out of here Makayla. This doesn’t concern you.”

“No. Go to class, Leonard,” she snapped.

“Ugh, fine.” Leonard looked dead at me. “This isn’t finished.”

I looked back at him and smiled. I flicked him off as his friend Richard pulled him back from coming to attack me again.

“James, what have I talked to you about a million times? Don’t start fights you can’t finish, especially with him,” Makayla urged.

“Well, if someone decides that they can walk all over me, I’m gonna show them I’m not someone you can treat like garbage,” I replied.

“Fair point, but still. One day, you and your sarcastic quips are going to get you the beating of a lifetime,” Makayla warned. “And I may not be around to protect you.”

“Oh Lord. Aren’t you supposed to be the smartest kid in 8th grade?” Makayla joked. “Because I don’t think getting into fights all the time with the No. 1 bully is a bright idea.”

“Thanks for the advice, Makayla, but I couldn’t care less.” I laughed.

“For a smart kid, you sure are stupid,” she said.

Eliana joined me and Makayla and Aaron grabbed my backpack and pulled me backward. “Hey lovebirds,” he said.

I almost fell to the ground.

“Was that necessary?” I asked. “Everybody is messing with me today.”

“Yes, James. It was,” Aaron laughed. “It was hilarious.”

Makayla laughed.

I snorted. “And for the record, we’re not lovebirds. We’re just friends.” I looked over at Makayla and she was still laughing.

“Yeah, we’re just friends.” Makayla said.

“Well, that’s not what Leonard thinks. And anyway, it was still funny,” Aaron grinned and Eliana gave him a look. “What? I’m only joking.”

“Ha ha. Very funny,” Eliana said, sarcastically.

“Thanks. My mother says I’m funny all the time too,” Aaron said. He puffed out his chest like he was all that.

“Yeah. Funny-looking,” I said.

“Shut up,” Aaron snapped. “Or I’ll drag your ass back down to the ground.”

“Well, with you dragging me to the ground, my brother throwing water in my face and Leonard trying to beat the living hell out of me, I’ve used up approximately 37% of my daily nutritional energy and it’s not even noon,” I said, shaking my head.

“Very analytical and statistical,” Eliana said.

“Stop it with the big words, El,” Aaron groaned. “Makes me brain hurt.”

“Alright Frankenstein,” Eliana jeered.

“Umm, actually it’s Frankenstein’s monster. Frankenstein was the scientist that made him and he was the smart one, but thanks for thinking I’m a mad scientist,” Aaron said.

“You can be super annoying sometimes Aaron,” Makayla said.

“I know,” he smiled. “It’s a natural quality of mine.”

“Sure, and I’m Bruce Wayne,” I said sarcastically.

“Shut up, man,” Aaron said.

“To go back to the topic of moms, how’s your mom, James?” Makayla asked.

“She’s doing better. I haven’t seen her this week, but I’m going after school today,” I replied.

“Wait, sorry I’m late to a lot of this. What’s going on with your mom?” Aaron asked.

“No one tells me anything.”

“She was diagnosed with MS a few years ago, but she had a major flare up about two months ago, so she’s been in a rehab center to help her re-learn skills and get her strength back. Dana’s been staying at the house with us since then, so we’re not all alone,” I said.

“That’s a real pain in the ass. I’m sorry dude,” Aaron said, looking down at his feet.

I patted his shoulder. “Nah man. It’s all good. She wasn’t able to walk or even feed herself at first. She’s been really doing with her occupational and physical therapy, so if we’re lucky, she’ll maybe get to come back home soon.”

“Well, tell her I say hi,” said Makayla.

“Yeah, I will.”

There was a quiet pause between us after that, and Eliana gave me a look. I looked away like I always do.

“So did you guys hear about Hera?” Eliana asked

“Bestie Hera or another Hera?” Makayla asked.

“The goddess Hera. What do you think?” I jeered. “Yes, bestie Hera.”

“Just making sure. You never know. Maybe Hera the goddess decided to come to our school and do some stuff,” Makayla laughed.

“Yeah, because a god or goddess would love to come to Phillips Middle School,” I joked.

“Maybe the devil will come,” Aaron suggested.

“Nah bro, even he’s too scared to come to our school. He’d much rather stay in hell than come here,” I said.

“Facts. Absolute facts,” Makayla said.

“Duh,” I said. “Obviously.”

“Alright, cocky,” Makayla joked.

“So, what happened to Hera again?” Aaron asked.

“She broke up with Sam,” Eliana replied.

“Yeah, so she might not be here today,” Eliana said.

“Damn,” said Makayla.

“I’m surprised she didn’t tell me,” Makayla said.

“Well, I understand. Break ups aren’t something you like to broadcast to lots of people,” I said.

Makayla nodded. “Fair point.”

We all walked to our classes, but Makayla, Eliana and I all had World History first hour. One of my least favorite classes, but it wasn’t *the* worst because I had Makayla in there to always make me laugh and enjoy the class. We walked in and sat down. Eliana sat at the table right behind me and Makayla sat on the other side of my table, facing me. She and I would always play games with each other, like staring contests, rock-paper-scissors, and once we mimicked each other and did the same movements. I always lost. It’s what we did the whole class time and we didn’t get much done. I’ve had a few of my best moments in that class. She’s my best friend. I’ve been friends with her for what feels like forever, but it’s only been a couple of years.

Makayla took a deep breath. “Wait, what are we supposed to be doing?”

“We have to write an essay about Ancient Egypt, like geography, social structure, religions, and origin of the country,” I said, reading from the smart board.

“Oh, alright. Thanks,” Makayla said, and she reached into her backpack and grabbed a pencil and her notebook. She placed the tip of her pencil on the paper and began to write. My eyes widened at the fact that she already knew what she was going to write. I was amazed. I

got to my own writing and she saw me and smirked. When I looked over again, she grabbed my paper and swapped it with hers. She tricked me. She began to laugh, and I smiled. I tried to grab my paper back, but she swatted my hand away. She used to do this a lot, but since we didn't have any other classes together, we stopped. It felt nice to get back into it.

I looked at her paper and thought it was blank, until I noticed a tiny little sketch at the top of the page. I said, "What is this? Because this doesn't look like schoolwork to me."

"I couldn't think of anything about Egypt, so I just drew a baby Yoda," she laughed.

"Oh, I see."

"Alright, I don't know where to start. I need help, or I'm gonna start drawing Yoda as a cowboy."

"What are you gonna call him?" I asked.

"Yoda-lay hee hoo."

I laughed so hard I nearly fell out of my chair. "Oh my gosh! That is the greatest name ever!"

Makayla pursed her lips and cocked her head to the side, then said, "I know. I'm just amazing like that." She smiled and looked back at the teacher, who was sitting at her desk with a couple of students around her.

After school, I walked home. I would normally take the bus, but today I just needed to walk. It gave me some quiet time to think about seeing mom.

When I got home, Dana was gone, picking up Maddox, I guessed. His school didn't have a bus so he always got a ride. I usually rode with Dana in the morning, but I took the bus or walked in the afternoon because I got out of school about an hour earlier than Maddox. Dana picked him up on her way home from her classes. I figured I would have about 45 minutes before they got home.

I turned on *The Flash*. I've seen it probably a hundred times, but it's so good. I was currently on season 8, episode 12. Throughout the episode, I watched my phone, waiting. For what?

I have no idea. A text? From whom?

From *her*?

I must've fallen asleep because suddenly the front door burst open and all I heard was Maddox stomping around and Dana yelling at him, "Knock it off," she said.

"Ugh, Maddox! Go take a shower!" I yelled. "I can smell you from here."

"Go to hell!" he screamed from the stairs. This was usual. Seeing mom makes us all anxious.

I was a little pissed off when he told me to go to hell until I heard him pull off his shirt and make a puking noise. “Oh my God! I do stink.”

I laughed as he shut the bathroom door, risking death from his own stench. I closed my eyes for a few more minutes, waiting for the others. Dana walked past me on the couch and asked me how school was.

“Boring as hell,” I said.

Dana snapped a dish towel towards me. “Language, James. You gotta get your curse word library in check. We’re not using that language in front of mom.”

“I won’t,” I said. “As long as you don’t tell her.”

“Deal,” said Dana.

“Cool.”

Maddox jumped down the stairs two at a time and Dana grabbed her purse and her keys from the hook by the door. “Alright boys, let’s go.”

I got up and grabbed my phone and Air Pods. We drove to the rehab center in silence. It wasn’t a long drive. We’re only ten minutes away. I just listened to my music.

When we arrived, my heart started pounding, very quickly, speeding with each step towards the entrance. When I got to the front door, I stopped in front of the glass doors and

looked right through, into the lobby.

“It’s OK, James. I’m right here,” Dana reassured me.

We walked up to the lady who sits behind the counter. I guess the receptionist of the rehab center of sorts. I don’t know much about hospitals and nursing homes and stuff.

“Hello,” Dana said. She is cool. “We’re the Carelli’s. We’re here to see Marilyn.”

“Ok. We moved Marilyn to a different room. She’s now in room 1008.” She pointed off to her right. “Go straight down that hall and turn left. Her room is two doors down.”

“Thank you,” Dana said. We walked down the hallway, following the directions the clerk gave us. I stopped, staring down at the second door on the left. As I stood in the middle of the hallway, the walls began to stretch and move in various ways. I felt woozy and sick. I couldn’t do this. I can’t do this, I thought to myself. I tried coming up with ways to escape, ways to get out of this.

“It’s OK, James,” Dana repeated. “I’m right here.”

“We got this, James. If I can do this, you can too,” Maddox said.

I walked forward and held both Dana and Maddox’s hands. We walked closer and closer to the door. We stood right in front of it and Dana opened it slowly. I saw mom in her hospital bed. Her hair was pulled back and in a scarf. She looked pale in the hospital gown and skinny

as hell. I was saddened by the sight of her there. It hurt so much to see her like that, but I couldn't leave.

"Hi, my babies," she said in a voice almost a whisper.

"Hi, Mom," we all said in unison.

"How are..." she started but she began to cough hard, like her lungs would just pop out of her. She grabbed the water on the table next to the bed to clear her throat, but she dropped the cup.

Dana ran over to the bed. "Oh shi—shoot! Don't worry, Mom. I'll get you some more water."

Dana went to the fridge and got another bottle of water and grabbed a towel from the bathroom on her way back. She gave the water to mom and cleaned up the puddle on the ground. I've never heard Dana almost curse. It surprised me.

"Are you OK?" Maddox asked.

"Ye-yes. I'm doing better," mom said. "Just got to get rid of this cough. How are you guys?"

"I'm doing great," Maddox said.

"I'm good," Dana said. "Finals are next week."

Mom looked at me, waiting for my answer.

I looked at Dana and Maddox. "I'm OK."

"Well, good. How's your grades?"

I smiled. "All A's."

Maddox nodded. "Same," he said. "Except for one B, but I'm gonna bring it up when I turn in my last project."

"That's great," Mom said. "I'm so proud of you all. What else am I missing, trapped in here?"

Dana said, "Me and Kelly have been doing amazing. I think I love her."

"That's amazing, Dana. That's amazing. Do I hear wedding bells?" Dana laughed. "I'll give you my grandmother's ring."

"Haha, no not yet, mom," Dana smiled. She looked down at the floor, avoiding eye contact. "I wish you were there with us," Dana began to cry a little and, to be honest, so did I. Maddox was still smiling. Not in a bad way. He just chooses to be happy and hyper at all times.

"Me too, honey. Don't worry, I'll be fine." She was just saying that so that Maddox didn't worry, but Dana and I shot a look at each other and back at mom. She could get better, but it's not getting any better right now. The door to her room opened and an aide carried in a

tray with her dinner. Dana helped get mom propped up and ready to eat. She buttered her bread and sat at the end of her bed. To be honest, it didn't smell very good, but mom seemed to enjoy it. We sat for about another hour, talking about pretty much nothing. Mom yawned and Dana stood up.

"OK, boys. We better head out and let Mom rest."

Maddox and I stood up and at the same time said, "Love you, Mom."

"I love you too," she replied. Dana and Maddox gave her a hug and headed towards the door. I gave mom a hug and stood by her for another second. "Oh James. I know it's been tougher for you than for the other two, but it's OK for you to be happy. I don't want to see you so sad every time you come visit."

"I'm sorry Mom. It's just that it doesn't seem fair. I hate seeing you in pain. You shouldn't have to go through all this." Tears were streaming down my face.

"It's OK. It will get better."

"But you don't know that," I said.

"Look," Mom said. "I know this is hard. But you are the man of the family and I need you to be strong for me, Dana, and Maddox. We need you as much as you need all of us. Together. That's the only way to do this, OK?"

“OK, Mom. I love you,” I said. “I love you, too, James. “Text me if you need to talk.

About anything.” She squeezed my hand.

“Alright.” I walked out the door and Dana, Maddox and I walked out of the hospital and got into the car. We all exhaled together and stayed quiet as Dana drove us home. I stared out the window.

On the way home, I felt a buzz in my pocket. I pulled out my phone and saw that Makayla texted me.

Makayla: Hey, I finished my official drawing of Yoda-lay hee hoo

Makayla: *Attachment: 1 Image*

I opened the image and when I saw her “creation” I thought of texting back, and I don’t know why, but I took my finger off the keyboard and turned off my phone. I went back to staring out of the car window, watching everything pass by in seconds. I chuckled at the drawing quietly. I had this weird surge of happiness through my whole body. *What the hell?* I thought.

I looked around and felt calm almost immediately. I smiled and thought about something that people say or think about at school. *Do I like Makayla Emerson?*

Chapter 2: We're Just Friends

For the past three months, I've pondered all kinds of questions. Like: should I try my absolute hardest in my new PE class? Or: should I write a book? Should I join theatre? Do I like Makayla Emerson?

I still don't know any of the answers except for the PE thing. The answer to that one was yes.

I walked into PE and expected nothing to happen. I didn't have a lot of friends in PE, but I did have Hera, Reva, and Lyla, all of Makayla's best friends. And my girlfriends. Not "girl" friends. Girl/friends. They get info on all the latest dramas in school. Films, celebrities, everything.

I walked over to the bleachers, where the girls were sitting. They were my only actual friends in this class, but it could be worse. I stomped up the bleachers and Reva whipped her head in my direction, as did everyone else. Reva waved and greeted me, "Hey James."

"Hey Reva. How's life," I asked them all.

"I'm doing good," Hera replied.

"Same," said Reva.

"Could be better, but fine," Lyla replied.

"What's wrong," I asked.

"Nah, just my normal attitude," Lyla replied. I laughed and nodded my head.

Hera turned to face us. "You guys heard about Leonard and Makayla?"

"Ooooh, I'm interested in this conversation," I slid into the conversation with the rest of the girls. "What happened?"

"Leonard and Makayla walked each other home yesterday and I heard from a friend of a friend that she likes someone whose name starts with 'L.'" Hera said.

"Oh," I said.

"It's so weird. I always thought you and Makayla would make a cute couple," Hera said.

"Me?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, you. I mean come on. The way you two talk in World History and all your other classes. And you're best friends, sure. Best friends, my ass," Reva said.

"Oh well it doesn't matter if we would be a cute couple. Sounds like she likes Leonard," I said. "Plus, we're just friends."

"True," Lyla said.

"But still," Hera said. "I still think you and Makayla would be a better couple than her and Leonard."

"Well, it's not going to happen. We're just friends," I said.

"Uh huh," Reva looked at me like she knew or at least had a feeling. "Sure."

When PE ended, I walked out of the gym and decided to and take the longer way and go through the cafeteria, instead of going straight to theatre class. I stopped at my locker and grabbed a notebook and my laptop.

While I stood in front of my locker, I saw Makayla and Leonard, walking together, and he had his arm over her shoulder.

My heart shattered. I walked to the bathroom and sat in a stall for a while until I heard the bell ring. I got up and headed to theatre class. I ran so fast, I nearly flew past the room and when I walked in, Mrs. Klynne wasn't in the room. Yes! I can't be tardy if she wasn't even there.

"Mr. Carrelli, tardy, I see," Mrs. Klynne appeared at the doorway.

Oh my God! This is so stupid. I was only 30 seconds late! "I'm sorry, Mrs. Klynne. I was busy in the office," I lied.

Mrs. Klynne walked past me and bent down to whisper in my ear. "I know you weren't down in the office. Don't let it happen again."

"Yes, ma'am. I won't," I said.

"Alright, this is your one warning," she said.

When she moved past me, I turned to Eliana in the desk next to me. "I think Leonard and Makayla like each other," I said.

"What makes you say that?" Eliana asked.

"Leonard walked her home last night and she told Hera she likes someone whose name begins with an 'L.'" I replied.

"Oh. That's quite the conundrum," Eliana said. "Anything I can do to help?"

"No nothing I can think of," I replied.

At lunch, I sat with Eliana, Aaron, and Hera. Hera is more of a new addition to the lunch table. Makayla was sitting with Reva and Lyla. Only four people per table.

"So, what's going on with you and Makayla?" Aaron asked.

"I heard she might like Leonard or someone whose name starts with an 'L.' I'm so fu—I am so happy." I placed my tray on the table and sat down. I put up my hood because Leonard was at the table behind me. He was sitting with Richard and Vicki. The bully table. Well, Vicki isn't that bad. Hera likes her.

"But aren't you two just friends?" Hera asked.

"Yeah. We're just friends. But Leonard is an asshole," I said.

She looked behind me and then got closer. "Speak of the angel."

“Hey James,” Makayla waved at me, and Eliana walked off.

“Hi Makayla,” I said.

“So...” Makayla didn’t know what to say. I didn’t either.

I rubbed the back of my neck and looked right at her. “Want to hang out tonight?” I asked.

“Yes,” she yelped. “I mean, yeah, sure. What time?”

“How’s 7:30?” I asked.

“That sounds great,” Makayla replied.

“I can’t wait,” I said as I nodded towards Makayla. She smiled and walked away.

“Smooth as hell, Mr. Carrelli,” Aaron joked.

“We’re just friends,” I snapped.

“Ha, ha, ha. Damn, Bro. I’m just messing with you,” Aaron said. “Have a fun night.”

As I walked home, I began to think. I thought about what the girls had said. What they said about me and Makayla. Would we be a cute couple? No, we’re just friends.

When I got home, I stretched out on the couch and stared at my phone. Waiting. I wanted to talk to Makayla, but I didn’t know how. Didn’t know if she wanted me to talk to her or wanted to talk in general. So, I put my phone down and started The Flash. Again. In the

middle of an episode, I dozed off.

I woke up quickly, nearly startling myself off the couch. I had been asleep for almost two hours, or about three episodes of The Flash. I made my dinner from leftover pizza in the refrigerator.

After I finished eating, I changed my shirt, pulled on my favorite hoodie and walked to Makayla's house. I knocked on the door and was greeted by Makayla's mom.

"Hello, James," she said, letting me in.

"Hello, Mrs. Emerson," I responded.

"Makayla is upstairs. She said you were coming over. You can head on up."

I thanked her and started up the stairs. I knocked on Makayla's door, and she yelled for me to come in. I opened the door and Makayla got up off the bed and pulled the blanket with her.

"Want to go outside?" she asked.

I nodded back. "Sure."

We walked downstairs and Makayla spread the blanket out on her front yard. I sat down and Makayla sat next to me and started touching my hair. I flinched a little, surprised. "What are you doing?" I asked.

Makayla laughed. "Sorry to scare you. It's just that your hair is so curly. I like patting it. It feels like a cloud."

"Thank you," I said. "I grew it myself."

"Ha ha. You're so funny," Makayla said, pushing me away with her hand on my shoulder.

I smiled at her and then just looked up at the sky.

Makayla followed my gaze. "What a pretty sky," she said.

It was a pretty night. The stars were glistening, and the moon was big and beautiful. It wasn't quite full but it was a bright, brown-tinged grey ball in the sky. We both laid back and looked up at the sky. The grass tickled my legs where they hung over the edge of the blanket. I pulled my knees up and rolled towards Makayla, who was looking right at me.

"The sky i-is so good," I messed up the words. "I mean the sky is gorgeous."

"Yes, I agree," Makayla laughed.

We were close, like almost kissing each other close. I shouldn't be thinking about this right now. Don't even think about kissing her. Damn it! I thought about it.

"Hey, James! Can I borrow you inside for a second?" Makayla's dad called out from the front door.

We quickly backed away from each other, and Makayla looked to the side. I saw her smirk and blush.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, sure, Mr. Emerson.”

I walked inside and Mr. Emerson sat in a chair and directed his eyes at the chair across from him. He was telling me to sit with his eyes. He also motioned with his hand. “Sit down James,” Mr. Emerson said.

“What’s up?” I asked. I began to sweat profusely, even though it wasn’t hot in the room.

“I know...I know you like my daughter,” Mr. Emerson said.

“We’ve been friends for a long time,” I was sweating profusely. I think he noticed.

“I...um...”

“Stop and listen. If your dad was around, I’d trust him to talk to you, so I’m just offering some advice. I know you think I’m gonna say something like ‘You can’t date my daughter,’ but she’s old enough to know how she feels and make her own choices.

“I know that you already have a girlfriend, though, so I’m just asking that you make a choice. If you like Makayla, tell her, and let the other girl know too. It may be cool to your friends that you have more than one girlfriend, but it’s important to be a man of honor. To start making decisions that will frame who you really want to be.” Mr. Emerson took his glasses

off and rubbed his eyes.

He sighed. "I know I can't protect her forever from getting her heart broken, but Makayla really likes you and I don't want her to get hurt."

I could barely believe what he was saying. *Makayla likes me?* I thought.

And she's the one that already likes someone else. Maybe. "Yes sir, but we're just friends. I don't like her, and she doesn't like me," I said. "She's going out with someone else."

"OK, but just think about what I'm saying. You know you can always come and talk to me."

I shook my head. "Don't worry, sir. Your daughter is very special to me. I would never do anything to hurt her." My heart raced. I nearly passed out. Wait, he said I have another girlfriend???

Mr. Emerson stood up and reached out to shake my hand. "OK, James. And if Makayla asks what we were doing, just tell her I had you help me hold the flashlight while I was looking at the dishwasher. It's been making a weird noise."

"Wait," I said. "It's been bugging out? I can help with that."

Mr. Emerson laughed. "That's Ok. You go on back outside. Makayla probably is wondering what's going on."

I walked back outside and sat down next to Makayla. She looked over at me and rested

her head on my shoulder.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Uh...your dad needed my help with the dishwasher. He thinks it’s not running right,” I lied.

“Oh OK,” she said.

“I have a lot of tests and projects for the next few days, but after things settle down, let’s do this again, OK?”

“That would be great,” she said. “Text me anytime you need a break.”

“I will. You too,” I said. “I mean, I’m not going to be studying that hard.” As I walked away, she was looking at me. I didn’t turn around to see for sure, but I just knew she was. And I smiled as I walked down the street.

Chapter 3: Best Friendship

Friday of that week, I decided to walk to school. I like to walk. I do my best thinking then. It was cold out but not to the point where I needed a coat or anything. I just wore a jacket and sweatpants. But by the time I got to school, it had started to snow. I walked into the school and ran right into another student, knocking their notebook and stuff right out of their hands.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” I looked up to see it was a girl. She was very pretty and she was staring at me.

“Hi, I’m Chloe. Chloe Paulson,” she introduced herself and held her hand out. “And your name?”

“Oh yeah. I’m James. James Bond.”

She smiled at the joke, and I kind of regretted it.

“Cute name,” Chloe smirked.

“Sorry. That was a lame joke. I’m James Carrelli.”

We shared an awkward silence and just stared into each other’s eyes for a moment. From the corner of my eye, I saw a blurry figure who looked familiar. I took a better look and behind Chloe was Makayla, staring at me. When I looked back at Makayla, she turned around

and started to walk in the opposite direction.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath.

“Huh?” Chloe asked and looked around.

“Hey, I’ll talk to you later. I gotta go meet up with a friend. Nice meeting you.”

“Nice meeting you too,” she replied.

“Before I run, want my number? To talk and stuff?” I asked. Stupid.

“Sure.”

As I gave her my number, she typed it into a text. “I’ll add you to my contacts, Mr. Bond.”

I knew it was a dumb thing to do, but Chloe seemed nice, and I could be good friends with her. Like I am with Eliana. Or Makayla.

I waited until Chloe sent me a text back and then I ran after Makayla. When I caught up to her, I said, “Hey, Makayla. What’s up?”

“Hi,” she snorted.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she replied, but she didn’t once turn to look at me.

“OK. Just checking,” I said. “My last test is this afternoon. Maybe we could hang out

this weekend sometime.”

“Sure,” she said. “Sounds great.”

“Gr-great. Sounds...sounds great,” I said.

She kept walking and I just stopped, watching her walk off. I watched her turn the corner, but she didn’t look back. Something was up, but I didn’t know what. I walked to my class and thought about the whole interaction with Chloe. And the sort-of-interaction with Makayla.

After school, I decided to walk to Eliana’s house instead of going straight home. I sent a text to Dana while I was walking.

Me: I’ll be home soon, heading over to Eliana’s house.

Dana: OK. Dinner about 6:30.

Me: Dealio. I’ll see you about 6.

Dana: K. Love ya.

Me: Love you too.

When I knocked on Eliana’s door, I could hear her coming towards the door. “Hi, James!” Eliana said as she opened the door. “Come on in.”

I walked in and we headed up the stairs to the game room. Eliana plopped on one end

of the couch. "So, what's wrong?"

"How did you know?" I asked

"We've been friends for a long time, James. And 90% of the time, you come to my house because something is bothering you or something bad happened," she said.

"So, I was walking into school and ran into a girl," I said.

"Oh oh," Eliana said.

"Yeah, so anyway. I talked to her. Her name is Chloe, and I looked behind her only to see Makayla standing right there. She just turned around and walked away, so I went to talk to her, and she seemed pretty mad," I continued.

"What did she say?" Eliana asked.

"Huh?"

"Makayla. What did she say?"

"Well... I caught up to her and I said, 'Makayla, hey!' She didn't even look at me but she said, 'Hi.' Really snarky. So, I asked her if she was OK and she said, 'I'm fine.' I had no idea what to say to her."

"You're screwed. Remember: any girl who says, 'I'm fine' is not fine," Eliana said.

"Damnit," I exhaled.

“You didn’t know that until now?”

“Well, I didn’t think it was true. I’ve seen it in movies and shows. But those are shows on TV,” I said. “I didn’t think too much about it.”

“You’re so stupid and so gullible. You watch too many movies,” Eliana jeered.

“Look, that’s not important,” I said. “What should I do now?”

“OK. The way I see it anything could’ve been ticking her off. Bad class, awful people, family stuff. The list goes on. Just talk to her. You’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

Eliana replied. “Just take it slow and do what you can to make it seem less awkward. Well, it’s you, so you’ll probably end up making it even more awkward. But just talk to her and explain that you don’t like Chloe girl.”

“OK. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I texted Dana again.

Me: Hey I’m headed home.

Dana: OK. Sounds good.

Dinner was just the same old dinner we always have. Dana cooks, Maddox gets pissed about something stupid, and I stay quiet. The daily “Carrelli Dinner.”

“So, anything new, Maddox?” Dana asked.

“Nope. My best friend Jakob has a girlfriend.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Dana said.

“Not really. He knew I liked her and decided to be an asshole anyway,” Maddox grunted.

“Maddox! Watch your language at the dinner table,” Dana snapped.

“Ugh, fine.”

“What about you James?”

Yeah, the fact that my best friend/crush thinks I like another girl that isn’t her, and my buddy Aaron continues to have one girlfriend after another.

“Nope,” I shake my head. “Nothing. Zero. Zip. Nada.”

After dinner, I went upstairs to my room. I flopped on my bed. Next thing I knew it was after midnight and I was still laying there, just staring into the darkness. Thinking About Makayla and Chloe. Makayla is 50/50, but Chloe is open. I was optimistic until I heard that voice in my head: *You’re not good enough for Makayla. Just give up...*

The next morning, I walked to school again and when I walked into the front door, Chloe was there at the same place we met. For the next few days, we met up there every morning and I walked her to her first class. On Friday, same thing. I walked into school and there she

was.

She said, "Hi."

"Hey, what's up?" I asked.

"Not much. What's up with you?"

"Nothing. I have a question," I said. My voice cracked a bit.

"Yeah, what is it?" she asked.

"Well I know we just met, but I like you..." I cleared my throat. "I was wondering if you'd like to date?"

"Oh my God! Yes, yes, one thousand times yes!" she replied.

I kissed her in front of the whole school, and as the other students crowded around us, I saw Makayla standing right there. Eliana was to my right. Eliana was giving me a confused look. Eliana was giving me a confused look and mouthed, *What the hell?*

I kissed Chloe again and looked to my left. Makayla was gone, just disappeared.

That whole week was filled with comments like: *How are you and Chloe? Or are you still dating Chloe?* Or comments from my friends: *Are you stupid?*

Yes. Yes, I am.

When the night came to see Makayla after school, I was getting worried. I was pacing

back and forth in my room.

Dana drove me to Makayla's house, and I knocked on her door. It was scary, just worrying she told her parents and wondering if they would be pissed off at me.

It was one of the most nerve-wracking things I've ever done. Makayla answered the door with a smile. "Hi James. Hi Dana."

Dana smiled back. "Hey Makayla. How are you?"

"I'm doing great. Thanks for asking," Makayla replied. She directed her attention back to me with a slight whip of her head and directed her eyes upstairs. "Let's go upstairs," she said to me.

Dana waved at us as she walked back to her car. "Have fun, James. Be home by 9:30.

"OK," I said.

We walked upstairs and it was just silence. Awkward silence.

"So, how's life?" I asked.

"Fine James. It's fine," she replied.

"Good. Good," I said fast.

Makayla looked right at me. "How's your new girlfriend?" she asked.

"Uh, good, great. Great," I lied. Nothing was *wrong*, but it's just...you know?

“What’s wrong?” Makayla always knew if something was wrong with me. In both ways.

“What did she do?”

“Nothing. I’m just not sure she’s the right one for me, but this is the first time I’ve been in an actual relationship and I don’t want to screw it up,” I explained.

“Well, if she doesn’t make you happy, you shouldn’t be dating her,” Makayla said. “You should be dating someone who knows how to treat you and knows how to make you laugh.”

Like you, I thought.

“Well, I guess that makes sense,” I agreed. “So, what’s right for you?”

Makayla played with a piece of hair by her ear. “I dunno. Probably someone who I can always go to and rely on to make me laugh and feel...happy. Loved,” she said. “Anything else you’d add to my list?”

“Same things, but I’d like someone who isn’t afraid to be honest. Someone who isn’t afraid to be themselves, instead of having to walk on eggshells around me. And someone who will let me do the same.” I replied.

“Awww, that’s so cute. I know one day you’ll find her,” Makayla said.

“Yeah, one day,” I muttered.

The next day in school, I walked down the halls with Chloe, and we passed Makayla and

Leonard. Makayla stared at me, and I stared right back at her. I saw her mouth form a small smirk and everyone disappeared. It was just me and Makayla. We got closer until Chloe began to grab my arm and snuggle in closer. Everything went back to normal and Makayla and Leonard were out of sight.

I walked to World History a different way and when I walked into class, I noticed everybody was in a different seat. The only open seat was next to Makayla. *What should I do now?*

Makayla turned to me and said, "Oh, hi James."

"Hi, Makayla," I said.

I saw her eyes widen as soon as she realized I was going to be right next to her. "Oh we sit next to each other?"

"Oh. Yeah. Gnarly," I said. *What am I? A damn surfer?*

"Yeah, gnarly," she repeated. She smiled.

Eliana was there and peered from behind Makayla and mouthed: "*Gnarly? Really?*"

I looked back at her and shrugged my shoulders. I mouthed back: "*I have no idea.*"

I set my notebook and laptop on the desk. Makayla and I were in the middle of the classroom, and we kept glancing at each other, awkwardly chuckling, and then looking away.

That's how it went for the whole hour. When the bell rang, we all grabbed our stuff and rushed out of the classroom. Makayla and I walked out together and walked to our next classes in silence. She had Business Finance and I had Economics. The rooms were right next to each other. It was so quiet, I was getting sweaty and shaky. My legs started to turn to jello. Not jelly, Jello.

"Welp, this is my stop," I said. "See you in a bit."

After school, I walked home and scrolled through TikTok. Memes, memes, memes. That's all there was. Sadly, a few dance TikTok's. A couple of my friends and some "celebrities" on TikTok. I got bored.

After dinner, I walked over Makayla's house. As usual, my heart was racing. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Over and over.

"Hi," she said to me as she opened the door.

"Hi."

"Go upstairs?" She asked.

"Sure," I replied.

We walked upstairs to her room. As usual, I sat on the carpet by the side of her bed. Makayla sat on the bed right above me. She rubbed my shoulder with her foot.

“So, I have a question,” I said.

“Oh, you do now? What is it?”

“Is what they say about you and Leonard true?” I asked.

“Oh, God. I don’t like him,” she replied. “We’re just friends. Nothing more, maybe something less.”

Well, I never heard that before!

“I just wanted to know for sure, didn’t know if the rumors were true or not,” I said.

“Don’t worry. I don’t like *him*.” She emphasized *him* in that sentence. So, I focused on that and wondered what she meant.

“So, are you still dating Chloe?”

“Uh, yeah. Things are going.”

Makayla nodded. “Cool, cool.”

“So, what do you want to talk about? Or what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?” She asked.

“Well, this is so much fun,” I said sarcastically. “I don’t know what to do and we’re barely talking. So exciting.”

“I know,” Makayla said. “I love this!”

“Movie?” I suggested.

“Sure. What movie?”

“I don’t know. How about ‘End Game’?”

“How about horror,” Makayla said.

“Sure,” I said.

She went to the search and went to the Horror and Thriller section. We scrolled the movies but nothing looked interesting. We passed Warlocks of Hell, House on Memory Lane, IT, The Awakening, Opposite Day, and Candyman. We went through every horror movie. Old. New. Everything. We agreed to turn off the TV.

“There’s no movie that is good enough to watch right now,” Makayla said.

“For real. Nothing.”

“Let’s play a game!” Makayla said.

“We should?”

Makayla clapped her hands together quickly. “Yes. How about *Would You Rather?*”

“Sure,” I agreed. “Who starts?”

“I’ll start,” she said.

“Wait, as in I ask you a question or you ask me?” I asked.

"You ask first," she said.

"OK. Would you rather sleep in a haunted house for a whole night or be lost in the woods for a whole day?"

"Sleep in a haunted house," Makayla answered quickly.

"Why," I asked.

"C'mon, it's the woods. I'm not getting lost in there. At least in a haunted house, I could fight the ghosts or something with chairs, candles, or other household items. In the woods, I'd only have sticks and dirt."

I was impressed. "Fair point," I said.

"Alright...would you rather have a pet tiger or a pet sloth," Makayla asked me.

"A pet tiger. Sloths are cute, but tigers are big and even cuter. How great would it be to cuddle with a tiger?"

Makayla laughed.

"Well, I'm bored again," I said.

"What do we do now?" Makayla asked.

"We could try to find another movie," I suggested.

"Sure, but there are no horror movies," Makayla said.

“We don’t have to watch horror movies,” I said.

“Romance?”

“Uh yeah. That sounds good,” I replied.

We sat on the bed, and she turned the TV back on. We browsed through the Romance section and clicked on it. She had like half of movies on her watchlist already. Casablanca. The Love Knight. Snowy Paradise. Titanic. Three Times the Charm. Love is an Open Door. I looked at her, grinning in a judgmental way. I snickered a little and she looked over. She says, “Uh...my mom likes to watch these sorts of movies.”

I could tell she was lying but I didn’t care.

“No, I don’t mind. Let’s watch one of them,” I said.

“Wanna watch One or the Other?” she asked.

I agreed. “Yeah, sounds great.”

She turned on One or the Other from Hulu. The movie started and I kept glancing at her. She was more focused, but I had the feeling she glanced over at me every time I wasn’t already looking at her. We did this throughout the movie. She was hooked on it. I think it might have been her favorite movie. We were in the exact middle of the movie, where Tommy was thinking about Sienna throughout the night, while she was on a date. Makayla was really

hooked on that part and she stared so hard at the screen and didn't blink once. Not once. I watched her as she stared at the screen, watching Tommy thinking about the girl he loved.

Is this how she feels? Is this how Makayla feels right now?

I watched the screen and turned back to her, and she was looking at me. She leaned in closer to me and I leaned in too. We were getting closer and closer. And then our lips met. I put my hand on the side of her face and we continued to kiss.

Suddenly, though, my eyes widened, and I backed away for some reason. "No. I'm sorry. I can't do this. I have a girlfriend and you're my best friend. I'm so sorry."

"Oh. No, no, it's fine," she mumbled. "It's all good. I mean we're just friends."

What did you do dummy? This was your moment! God, James, can't you do anything right? Just act normal and talk to her. Tell her!

We finished the movie in complete silence, and I felt so guilty and upset. I looked over at her a few times and her eyes were red like she was crying. Or she was pissed. I couldn't tell. I still felt bad, but the movie had ended.

"What do you want to do now?" I asked.

"Nothing. I just remembered that I have to go babysit for my cousins tonight, so you better go," Makayla said. I knew she was lying.

"Makayla, please," I begged.

“No, just go please. I’ll see you at school tomorrow,” she said. I saw a tear roll down her cheek and I looked down at the ground.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

As I walked out of her room, I thought she would leave too, but as soon as I left, she slammed the door shut behind me. My heart sank and I walked downstairs and out the door.

As I walked home, I looked back and saw her close her curtains.

Today was the day! I know yesterday wasn’t the best of days, but as I walked to school with a smile on my face, I felt empowered and confident. For the first time in forever, I walked past Chloe and went straight to Makayla’s locker. Only problem? She wasn’t there.

“Hey James! What’re you doing?” Chloe asked.

“Look, I need to talk to you about something, Chloe.”

Chloe looked at me. “What is it?”

After that question, a weird feeling filled my stomach. Something I couldn’t explain.

“You’re amazing. But I’m in... I like someone else, and I wanna be with her,” I said.

“Is this a joke?” Chloe’s face was bright red.

“No, I’m sorry,” I said.

“Wow. Well have fun with whoever the little hussy is.”

I reached out and touched Chloe on her arm. "She's not a hussy, so don't speak about her like that."

"Go to hell James," she stared at me with icy anger. I actually thought maybe she liked someone else and that she would be feeling a little bit relieved, so I was surprised at how pissed she was acting. Her eyes were staring at me cold. "Get the hell away from me."

"Look, I'm sorry, but I need to be honest with you," I said.

"Asshole." She marched off and I went the other way to find Makayla. I found her in the center of a crowd. I was so excited. I was going to tell her how I felt about her for real. My plan was coming full circle. Get closer to her. Break up with Chloe. Ask Makayla out.

"Makayla!" I navigated myself through the crowd and saw more. She was smiling. Until she saw me. I moved a few people and saw what was going on. Leonard was there and he pulled her towards him and kissed her in front of everyone. A small group of students made a tight circle around them as the rest of the students moved past them. There was another feeling, but it was my heart this time. I felt sad. So, I was just standing there and she looked over at me. She was still kissing Leonard but looking right at me. She backed away and smiled, but I left. The thing is, I couldn't tell if she was looking for me, but at this point...At this point, I didn't care. I mean after all, we're just friends.

Chapter 4: Lost Friends

Two weeks had gone by since, you know, and Maddox was sick, so he had to stay home.

Dana drove me to school and the first half of the trip was pretty quiet.

“How’s Makayla?” Dana asked.

There goes my quiet time. “She’s good. I haven’t talked to her a lot lately,” I said.

“About two weeks.”

“Two weeks? Why”

“She’s dating someone else right now and hasn’t been able to talk much lately.”

“Did she tell you that? That she’s dating someone else?”

“No, but it’s pretty obvious,” I said.

“I’m sorry. I hope you two figure it out. I feel like she liked you,” Dana said. “She gave you the advice to stop dating Chloe. She was always at the house hanging out or you were over there. I just figured you two would end up together. Plus, I haven’t seen Chloe at our house once.”

“It’s because she sneaks in,” I jokingly whispered.

“What?!” Dana said.

“I’m kidding, Dana. Me and Makayla and not dating so just knock it off, please, and

thanks.”

We spent the rest of the drive in complete and utter silence, but when I walked into school, Principal Kane stopped me.

“I would like to see you in my office, Mr. Carrelli,” he said.

Oh damn, am I in trouble?

I walked behind him into his office and began to get nervous. At least more nervous than I already was.

“Am I in trouble?” I asked.

“No,” Mr. Kane began as he settled into the seat behind his desk. “I wanted to talk to you about your future.”

“OK. Sure,” I said. Still nervous.

“You’re a bright kid. A’s every year in elementary, middle and now high school. You have one of the best attendance records in the whole school. You were the star of the baseball team before you were injured, and I know that was tough, but I’ve been getting some calls from a couple local colleges and they have high hopes that you will play again this season.”

I sat there for a moment. That was a lot to process. I thought I was done with baseball forever.

“OK,” I said.

“That’s it? Anything else on your mind? What do you think about trying out for the team?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’m definitely going to think about it, though. Thank you, again, sir,” I said as he gestured me out of his office. I could tell he was watching me walk away and I tried to stand up straight.

“Hey, Carrelli!” Oh my God. Do we have to do this right now? At this moment? My life is already crazy right now.

I saw Leonard and his goons marching toward me and I slammed my head against my locker. I lifted my head and grinned. My face said, *Hey I’m friendly. No need to hurt me.* But the inside of me was saying, *Say something sarcastic or jackassy.*

I tilted my head to the side. *Guess which one I picked?* “Hey, Leo.”

“Are you thinking about trying to date my girl?” Leonard asked.

I turned back the other way and finished getting stuff out of my locker. “No.”

“Stop lying, douchebag,” Leonard said.

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m not dating anyone. And Makayla? We’re just frie--. I don’t know actually.”

“People said you kissed her. That doesn’t sound like just friends.”

How in the hell did he find out about that? I mumbled to myself.

“Hey James,” Makayla walked up behind Leonard.

Leonard looked at her then at me. He clenched his fist, then bam! He clocked me in the side of my head.

I fell to the floor and Makayla ran over to me. “Oh my God, James. Are you OK?”

Leonard loosened his shoulders and straightened his shirt. “C’mon, Makayla,” he ordered. “Let’s go.”

“No,” Makayla said back.

“Yes, we’re leaving.” Leonard grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away from me.

“Now.”

“Fine. You don’t need to manhandle me. I’ll text you later, James,” Makayla said.

“Like hell you will!” Leonard thundered.

“You can’t control me, Leonard,” Makayla screamed.

“I don’t care. You’re not talking to that jackass,” Leonard said. Leonard looked back and pointed at me, like a supervillain or a bully in an old TV show. “This isn’t over, Carrelli.”

God he even sounds like a villain.

They walked off and I sat on the floor. What the hell. Is this a joke? I just got my ass

kicked with absolutely no teacher in sight. And my best friend/crush walks off with him. Eliana and Aaron came running over. I don't know why, but when they came over I pushed them away and stormed off to class.

In class, I couldn't pay attention to anything that was happening. I was zoned out, thinking...no, sulking...about what just happened. I wasn't sure which hurt worse: getting punched by Leonard or getting left there to bleed to death by Makayla. We used to be best friends. What's happening? How can she be with someone who's as big of a jerk as Leonard?

As soon as the bell rang, I caught up with Makayla and stood right in front of her.

"Whoa! James, are you OK?" Makayla asked.

"Tell your ape boyfriend to leave me alone," I said.

"James, calm down. You're both acting like second graders."

Makayla held my arm and wouldn't allow me to move. She tried smiling to calm me down, but that just made me madder. I wasn't going to fall for that this time.

"Talk to me, James," she said.

I ripped my arm out of her grasp and looked at the surprise on her face.

"No, I won't. I can't do this. You made a choice back there," I said. "And you chose him."

Her smile turned to sadness and confusion. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I've been working my ass off in school, and ever since I met you, I've been struggling with my feelings for you. And then you decide to date that asshole, and he beats the piss out of me and you don't do a thing, except calm him down and take him away," I said. "You don't even text me anymore."

"What?" Makayla was confused. Maybe I spoke too fast. I don't know, but something was on her mind. "I don't understand."

"I don't want to be friends with you anymore. You were my best friend, but with how you and Leonard are treating me, it's not worth it. I'm done."

"You wanna end this?" Makayla looked straight down and clenched her fists hard. So hard the veins in her hands were showing and looked like they were about to pop out of her hands. *Shit*, I wondered. *Was she gonna punch me too?*

"Done with what?" she said. "You barely call. You hardly text. You haven't contacted me at all for awhile so the only way we can interact is through short, cold texts or casual in-person conversations. Which, by the way, we've talked more in the last ten minutes than we've in the last two weeks. You see me and Leonard kissing, after you kissed me and before that, and then you ghost me for the last two weeks. And then you do this? You need to figure out

your problems. But all I have to say now is that Leonard isn't the only asshole I'm dealing with. You're as much of an asshole as he is, James." Makayla stormed off and left me there by myself in the middle of the empty hallway.

Aaron and Eliana came up just as Makayla left and they both looked me up and down.

"What's going on?" Aaron asked.

"Nothing. Nothing," I lied.

"Well, something, man," Aaron said. "You look like hell."

"Do you know what it's like for one of your best friends to treat you like garbage, like you don't exist?" I said.

"What?" Aaron said. "What are you talking about?"

Eliana nodded. "Makayla?"

I nodded back.

I tried to explain. "Makayla and I have been friends since 4th grade. But ever since she has been going out with Leonard, she has treated me like a secondary character in her book or movie. Her boyfriend comes first, and I'm nothing but spam. "

Eliana sighed. "This is just so stupid, James. Before Leonard, you liked her and was going to ask her out. But you just gave up. You still could've told her you liked her, but you

never said anything to her. How was she supposed to know what you're thinking?"

Aaron and Eliana turned around shaking their heads.

I was just about ready to head to the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face, when Leonard came up and pushed me with both of his hands, knocking me on my ass. "No Makayla to protect you now, dick," he said.

I stood up and he punched me right in the face. I blacked out for a split second but then I got mad. I pulled myself back up again and ran at him and kicked him in the back. I grabbed my laptop and smacked him in the head with it. Leonard dodged one of my hits and cracked me right in the side. I couldn't breathe.

All of a sudden, we were surrounded by kids. Even if a teacher would've wanted to get through, they couldn't because students were pouring towards us from every direction.

I looked over the crowd and saw everyone, but it was all a blur. I couldn't be sure who anyone was. I ran into the crowd to escape, and Leonard tried to follow but I was able to maneuver in the swarming crowd better than he could. I found my way to the entrance of the school, pushed through the front doors and ran towards home.

When I got inside the house, I was out of breath and seeing stars. I limped my way to the couch and passed out. When I woke up, Dana and Maddox were standing above me. They

looked worried. I looked up at the ceiling and groaned.

“What the hell happened to you, James?” Maddox asked.

“You okay bud?” Dana asked.

“I fe-feel like cr-ap,” I groaned.

“I think we need to take you to urgent care, and have you checked out,” Dana said.

Maddox was the stronger one, so he pulled me up slowly and walked me to the car. I sat sideways in the back, with my legs stretched out on the seat.

“Alright, you comfortable back there?” Dana asked.

“Mhmm,” I groaned.

Maddox hopped in the front passenger seat and looked back at me. “So, did you win?”

“Maddox!” Dana yelled.

Maddox turned his head to the other side of the seat and mouthed, “Did you?”

I laughed, but my lungs hurt, so it was a laugh-cough, or a “lough.”

“Please don’t laugh. I don’t think fighting is funny,” Dana said.

“Sorry sis,” Maddox said.

I stared at the window the whole ride to the hospital. Dana was on the phone with mom as she drove. It wasn’t the same as her being with us, but I was glad she was part of this.

When we arrived, Dana got out first and opened the door for me. And Maddox came out and carried me again. “I’ll never feel strong or masculine ever again.”

"I know," Maddox said.

When we walked to the front desk, Dana started talking to the receptionist and handed the phone to me.

"My sweet boy," mom said. "What happened?"

"I messed up." A tear rolled down my cheek, but I was in so much pain, I couldn't even feel the teardrop roll down my face. It stung a little, as it coursed down my face, and through my bruises and scrapes

"Have a seat and we'll call you up in a second," the front desk lady said.

When I got called back to a treatment room, Dana went with me. The nurses cleaned the blood and tears off my face. They put some cream and band aids all over my face. Towards the end, I looked like a beat-up superhero. But I definitely wasn't feeling like a hero.

Maddox walked into my room and looked at me with his eyes scrunched up, before sitting down. "Who did this to you?" Maddox asked.

"It's a long story."

I clutched my leg. It hurt more because it was cramped, and the bruise that led up from my upper thigh to the bottom of my side rib didn't help the pain either.

"Does this 'long story' have something to do with Makayla?" Dana asked.

"Yes, sort of. It was her asshole boyfriend."

"Language!" Dana snapped. "Explain James."

"So, in February of 8th grade, I began to like Makayla. I've known her for six years, but I started liking her at the end of 8th grade. I didn't realize that I liked her 'till the

middle of the 9th grade. And she started dating this guy, Leonard Lance. And I got jealous and decided we shouldn't be friends because it would ruin her relationship with Leonard and our friendship. After all, she could only focus on one of us, and that one was obviously Leonard. He treats Makayla like crap, and I got pissed and lashed out, then I got into a fight with Leonard," I explained.

Maddox grinned and I knew what he was gonna ask.

And he did. "Did you win?"

Dana gave him a look, but I knew he was smiling still.

I had that feeling.

"No... No, I didn't," I coughed. "Look at me. Do I really look like I won?"

"My bad," Maddox looked down at the floor.

It was quiet for a minute, I didn't know if someone was gonna ask anymore questions or talk about the Makayla thing.

"Wow, I'm gonna need a second to process that," Dana said. "So, you started to like her, and tried asking her out, but you're not sure she likes you, so you backed off?"

"Basically. But I know she doesn't like me."

"You know she doesn't like you. Or you assume?" Dana asked.

"Uh-uh. I assume," I stammered.

"Uh huh, you should go talk to her," Dana said.

"No, I'm probably the last person she'd want to talk to right now."

"What made you like her?" Maddox asked.

"You're full of a lot of questions," I joked. "Answer the question," Maddox demanded.

“She’s amazing, she’s hot, warmhearted, and very kind,” I answered.

“What else?” Dana asked.

“She’s different.”

“What do you mean different?” Maddox asked.

“With my first girlfriend, she was very... She wasn’t right for me. She was different and a bit of a b-”

“Language,” Dana snapped.

“I didn’t say it,” I argued and smiled. “But with Makayla, I feel like I can be myself. I can say whatever, and do whatever that most might find crazy, stupid, or weird. But Makayla doesn’t care, she encourages it and finds it hilarious. She makes me feel... Normal.”

“Wow, you love her.”

“No, I don’t use the L word,” I remarked. “That’s an old people’s word or relationship word. But in my case, it’s...”

“Complicated,” Maddox interrupted.

“Yes,” I said.

“So what? You love her. It’s not weird,” Dana said. “It’s just a feeling, and you may only feel that once in your life. Love is that feeling you get when that person makes you feel happy, and ‘at home.’ Where you don’t have to walk on eggshells around them or treat them differently than others. You’re just yourself when you’re around them. Love is to be deeply connected to someone or something. The basic meaning of love is to feel that you more than ‘like’ someone. It is a bond that two people share. And I can guarantee, she

feels the same. The way you were with her when she came over was just magical to watch. I saw the happiness and joy on your faces, you can't fake that sort of passion."

"I spent all of my high school life just lying to everyone I know. By saying *we're just friends*, I lied to my friends, myself, and her. Just saying it over and over. *We're just friends*. But it was all a goddamn lie!" I cried.

"You know. I went through the crush situation and the girlfriend stuff," Dana held the sides of my head with both her hands. "It's hard but is so worth it in the end. I mean now I have the best fiancée anyone could ask for. She was very understanding about my life and asked about mom and tried to help at the beginning. She has been everything to me. I love her more than almost everyone I know. And we have the power to make each other have the best lives possible."

"Wow... You must love her," I said.

"Of course, more and more each day," she replied.

"Gnarly," I said.

"Ah, I remember when gnarly was the hip thing of the decade," Dana laughed.

"Really? It sounded stupid in my head," I joked.

"Alright. Let's go back to the original topic. My point is, if you tell her, you like her, the worst that could happen is that she doesn't talk to you." She held my hand. "Plus, I've seen you two and if she doesn't know you like her, something's up, because it's very obvious."

"Yeah, but I cannot not talk to her, she's the only person I want to talk to almost every day of every year."

“I know, which is why it’s harder, but it’s a chance you have to take. Developing crushes on your friends can be tough.” She looked at her necklace. “When you like some random girl or a friend that you barely know, it’s easy to tell them, at least in my opinion. But when you fall for your friend, for a very long time, you feel like if you tell that person that it would jeopardize everything. It sucks, but still. I say you should tell her.”

I nodded. To hear Dana explain things, everything made total sense.

“Kelly and I hit a lot of bumps,” Dana spun her engagement ring around her finger. “It’s just the process in a relationship. If you love someone, sometimes it might not work out. But in the end, if you are made for each other, then you’ll end up together eventually.”

“Yeah, so couldn’t Eliana and Aaron help you with this?” Maddox asked.

“We three aren’t on good terms, but you’re right. I need their help.”

“Alright, let’s get out of here,” Dana said. “You can call mom on the way and let her know how you’re doing.”

When we got home and I settled into bed, I called mom. She wanted to know all the details that I had just told Maddox and Dana. Everything that led up to getting the snort knocked out of me.

“This Leonard guy is a real dick,” I said.

“James. Language. And that’s not a good reason,” she knows me too well.

“I-.” I couldn’t finish. It... It was complicated.

“What?” She definitely knew what I was gonna say but didn’t know if I did.

“I thought by ending things with her, I could prevent myself from going through more pain. In college, I won’t talk to her as much or at all because we won’t go to the same

college, so why go through it all then? I didn't handle it in the best way if I'm being honest, but it was the best time to do it," and I took a sip of water.

"Well that probably wasn't the smartest decision, bud. James, do you love the girl?"

I set my glass down.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Do you love her?" She repeated.

"I told Dana and Eliana, I don't use the L word," I said. "So, I really don't know."

"Well, I think you do," she said it so quietly I could barely hear her. "I think you love her. Would a girl you don't love be worth all of this trouble?"

"I-I guess that's fair," I stammered. "Thanks mom. Love you."

"No problem, I love you too, Jameson," I haven't heard my actual name being used for years. Ever since I was a kid. "Try not to get into any fights when you go back to school in a week."

"A week!" I had to cough after because my throat hurt. But I did sound cool.

"Yeah, I talked with your principal, and you've been suspended for a week."

"Ugh, dammit. I'm going to have a crap-load of homework," I groaned.

"I think you can finish that homework in your sleep. I believe in you."

Before she hung up, I thought of what Maddox said and it's exactly what dad would've said. "Did you win?"

Chapter 5: It's Not As Bad

At first it seemed like a week would take forever to get through, but it took me a week to heal so it kind of worked out perfectly. Today was my first day back. And also, my first class back with Makayla. I walked into class, but she wasn't there. I spent the whole day with my Air Pods in, listening to my playlists. Not Olivia Rodrigo and Dua Lipa though. If I had to listen to those like Eliana, I think I would lose my mind and seem more emo than I actually am. My playlists were mostly upbeat music to get me psyched up, but every now and then, I listened to a sappy love song. That made me really miss seeing Makayla. I texted her twice, but she didn't respond.

During lunch, I went to my favorite teacher, Mr. Flynn, since I didn't have anywhere else to go or anyone to sit with. Mr. Flynn was the world history teacher.

"Mr. Flynn, can I talk to you for a minute?" I requested.

"Yeah, sure James, what's up?" Mr. Flynn asked.

"I need your advice or help," I said.

"Okay, lay it on me," Mr. Flynn said.

"So, I don't want to name names, but I've made a bad mistake, I fell for my best friend. And I wish I didn't, because we had the best friendship throughout the years, we've known each other and I lost her in the process, and then I lost my other best friends because of it," I explained.

"Oh wow," he seemed surprised like no one had ever told him something like that.

"James, would these individuals be Eliana, Aaron, and Makayla?"

“Yes, yes they would,” I replied.

There was a moment of silence between the two of us and Mr. Flynn finally spoke up because it was getting so quiet, I could hear the dust forming on the top of his bookshelves at that point.

“Look James, you have two options. You can either let this all blow over and leave everyone behind, which is the one I wouldn’t recommend. Or you can do the mature thing and talk to each of them separately and apologize to each of them, starting with Aaron, then Eliana, then Makayla. I know it seems like the end of the world for you right now, but you’re only in your third year of high school. Next year, you will be picking your college and you’ll have the rest of your life to get things right. You’ve got to learn to trust your heart.”

“Alright, thank you, Mr. Flynn,” I said.

“Have a good rest of your day man, see you tomorrow,” Mr. Flynn said.

The bell rang, and I could hear the kids swarming to their classes. Like, why is everyone in such a hurry to get to class?

I walked into the classroom, and I saw one of Leonard’s friends, Adam. He got out his phone, and I walked back out, and there I saw Adam, peering out of the class, at me, and there was his other friend, Richard, watching at the end of the hall. He began to walk toward me. So, I walked the other way and begin to jog, just before I saw an arm thrown right in front of my face. Leonard was standing right there.

“Hello James,” Leonard stared at me menacingly and I began to laugh. “We need to talk.”

He pulled me up and slammed me against the lockers.

“Ahh the memories,” I said. “I’m pretty sure right here was the first time you dented the locker with my face. Oh, and I think it’s the spot where you tried to punch me and instead broke your hand. That was funny as hell,” I joked.

“Shut up dumbass. Talk one more time and I’m gonna break that smartass jaw of yours,” Leonard threatened.

“You say ‘ass’ a lot, and it’s annoying. I get it, you’re not the *personality* type guy,” I chuckled.

“Listen to me, and I want you to really listen. This is all your fault, if you didn’t decide to be an obnoxious pain in my ass, I would still be with Makayla. So, for this last month, I’m gonna make your life a living hell,” Leonard thundered.

“Again, with the ass. God, you’re on the path of being Red from That 70’s Show,” I laughed. “You sound just like: *‘Eric, didn’t I tell you to wash up for dinner? I know, it’s difficult to hear with your head up your ass.’* Will it ever end?”

“You asked for it punk,” Leonard lifted his fist and got ready to knock me out. I dodged his attack, and he cracked his hand on the locker. A crowd of other students surrounded me, Leonard, and Leonard’s goons. “Yeah! How does that feel dumbass? Huh, got anything else to say smartass.”

“Aww, you called me smart, but that’s not my *Final Words*. Here are my last words- Be sure to hit my bad side. I have a photo shoot tomorrow,” I laughed.

He got in the position to punch me, but he looked past me, and he let go of me to block whatever was coming towards him. It was Aaron. He tackled Leonard into the lockers,

even though Leonard appeared as if he were ready to counter his tackle, but they both fell down.

“Get away from my best friend douchebag!” Aaron punched Leonard in the chest and knocked him down. Leonard clutched his chest, and his friends pulled him up. Aaron walked over to me and pulled me up. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I replied. I saw Leonard run at him and get ready for another punch. “Look out!”

Aaron looked back and Leonard punched him in the jaw, and Aaron flopped to the ground. He began to cry, and he clutched his jaw.

“Stay out of my way,” Leonard snarked.

“Hey, douchebag,” someone thundered.

Leonard looked behind him and Makayla sucker punched him in the face and slammed him into a locker.

The whole crowd cheered like this was WWE. Which was hilarious. The crowd of students erupted with laughter as Leonard got up with a bruise already starting to show. He ran to the bathroom and slammed the door shut so loud that it echoed throughout the hall and cracked a piece of the wooden door. It was only like a one or two inch door, but still.

“Holy crap,” I exclaimed.

“You’re welcome,” Makayla walked away, and I pulled Aaron up.

“Hey man, I’m sorry for my attitude and the last time we talked. I never meant to be a douchebag and I should’ve been a better friend,” I said. “I was just going through stuff, and I took it out on you and Eliana. And for that I am sorry.”

“Hey, it’s all good man. I wasn’t extremely mad at you. I just needed a moment to kind of chillax and take a break from you. Sorry for almost attacking you. I lost my cool, and that wasn’t cool. I know Eliana will probably forgive you, it’s like an eighty percent chance. But I don’t know how you’re gonna get Makayla back. She’s kind of pissed off at you,” Aaron said.

“Don’t worry, I know what to say,” I said. “Plus, she did just save our asses.”

I walked over to Eliana’s house after school, and when I knocked on the door my heart began to pace.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it!” Eliana shouted from behind the door.

When she opened it, her eyes stuck on me like a fly in a venus fly trap.

Bad analogy. I know.

“James, what are you doing here?”

“Look, I’m so so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I’ve been going through stuff, and I shouldn’t have taken that anger and sadness, and directed it at you. I know this probably doesn’t mean anything to you right now, but I still need your help with Makayla. And maybe I could help you with anyone you might like,” I said.

“How long have you been planning to use that one?” Eliana laughed.

“Haha, what are you talking about?” I said.

“It’s okay James. Do you want to come in?” She asked.

“Sure, I have to get home sometime soon, so I won’t stay for too long,” I replied.

“We can talk, you can give me a full recap and we can talk without insulting each other,” Eliana said.

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I said.

She welcomed me in and I placed my backpack on the coat hanger and walked upstairs with Eliana.

“Alright,” she started. She closed her door and sat down on a beanbag in her room. “Start from the beginning.”

“Okay,” I began. “So a couple of weeks ago, Hera, Reva, and Lyla were telling me about Makayla and Leonard, and I began to get jealous as I told you, and I started to date Chloe. I knew she would choose him over me because we hadn’t talked in weeks and then I... Then I-I was... I was selfish. Oh my god, she was right. I am a selfish prick,” I concluded.

“Hey don’t say that, sure you might have been a little out of line and a bit of a douchebag, but it was out of love, and she probably loves you too, I think,” Eliana explained.

“I don’t use the L word Eliana, how many times do I have to say it?” I yelled.

“Sorry, but you can do this,” she said.

“You know my odds couldn’t be more against me right now, can they?” I asked.

“They could, there are still many things that could go wrong, this is an okay-best-worst scenario,” Eliana replied.

“True,” I said.

“Alright, so if I’m being honest, you were kind of a jerk. You can’t make her choose, and I know you like her, and you worry if she doesn’t choose you for one day, she

won't choose you at all, but she's an independent woman and she can do whatever she feels is right and natural for her," Eliana said.

"Wow, thanks. I know I was an asshole, I just got so jealous, and it made me... It changed me and made me into a person I'm really not," I said. "I just want to be friends with her because I'd rather have her in my life as a friend than nothing."

"Wow, okay! I have a plan that'll help you," Eliana said.

"I'm all ears!" I exclaimed.

"There's a party at Aaron's house next week, and Hera, Reva, and Lyla are going, so if I talk to them, I could maybe convince them to get Makayla to go," Eliana explained. "And then you can talk to her there and try to make things right."

"That's a great plan, but how are you gonna explain it to her?" I asked.

"I'm just gonna be friendly and tell Hera and the others that she should come to the party, get out, and stuff," Eliana replied. "Don't worry, I won't mention you in case she says no instantly."

"Alright," I said. "Want to talk real quick?"

"Sure, what do you want to talk about?" Eliana asked.

"I don't know, anything new with you? Crushes, family stuff, drama?" I asked

"Well, I do need to ask you something. Can I ask you something," Eliana sat down.

"Yeah, what's up?" I asked.

"So, it's about Noah, I have a crush on Noah, and sometimes I feel like he flirts with me. But I can't be sure, and I don't know what to do," Eliana replied. "So, my question is. What should I do?"

“Okay, well how good of friends are you?” I asked.

“Umm, we’ve known each other for about six years, and we text each other daily.

Well, most of the time,” Eliana said.

“And what are you afraid of?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said reluctantly.

“Eliana, come on,” I snorted.

“I’m afraid... I’m afraid he won’t like me, that if I tell him I like him, everything will change because I don’t want to lose him. Like me and Makayla are like best friends and you and I are best friends, but I like him. I don’t want to lose him,” Eliana replied.

“Well, if you guys are truly that close, and you confessed your feelings for him, there shouldn’t be any reason for him to stop liking you. Worst case scenario he stops talking to you, and if that’s how he reacts, is that someone you’d want to be friends with or even date?” I asked.

Eliana sat still. Neither she, nor I knew what to say after that. Like I’ve only been an expert in this stuff for about 12 minutes myself and now I’m giving her advice.

“How come you haven’t used that with Makayla?” She asked.

“I-I... I don’t know. It’s the same thing, but at the same time, it’s so different. I’ve known Makayla since middle school, I think. Wow, more than half a decade. Anyways, I’ve wanted to date her, but I’m afraid everything will change,” I replied.

“What will change though?” Eliana asked. “I mean, if you two are best friends, not much should change. Plus, you guys are practically acting like a couple. So, if you two date, the only

thing that changes is your status or title. It goes from friendship to relationship. Not a big change.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true, but I’m still nervous, plus I don’t even know she likes me,” I remarked.

“Well, apply this conversation to your life and Makayla,” Eliana said. “You should tell her how you feel tonight.”

“Ehh. Maybe. Thanks, Eliana, just thank you. I hope you can use what I said with Noah, and I hope it works out. Alright, I’m gonna go find Makayla, but text me any time if you need help with anything on what to do with him,” I said.

“Thanks, James,”

“No problem, I’ll text you more later, I gotta go home. See you later.”

“Alright I’ll text you tomorrow,” Eliana said.

Chapter 6: We're Not Just Friends

I walked over to Eliana's house to get last minute advice before the party. I rang her doorbell and walked in. I walked up to her room and walked in.

"Hey!" I exclaimed.

"Hey, give me a minute, I'm changing," Eliana said from the closet. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay," I walked to her bed and sat down. I sat on my phone and watched YouTube. Eliana walked out wearing the darkest colors. "So not feeling colorful today I see?"

"Man shut up," Eliana said.

"I'm sorry... Sort of," I jeered. "Anyways, where are you going?"

"Date. I took your advice and I asked Noah out a couple days ago. I'm going to meet him at his house and then we're doubling with his cousin, Josh, and his date."

"Wow, that's great! Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah," Eliana replied. She grabbed her mini purse, and we headed out the door.

"You and I are gonna be talking a lot on the walk there."

"Dealio, what do you want to say first?" I asked.

"I want to ask you about Makayla."

"Yeah, what's up?" I said.

"Do you love her?" "What?"

"Do you love her?" Eliana repeated.

"I don't use that word, plus she doesn't like me," I said.

“Answer the damn question, James,” Eliana didn’t seem to tolerate my stupid comments at the moment.

“I don’t use that word, Eliana. I think she’s amazing. The way she is makes me better. Her voice is something I can listen to forever, and I would never get annoyed. Her laugh is beautiful and makes me feel happy. She is very kind, sweet, and respectful to everyone. She can always bring a smile to my face, even when I’m having a bad day. She’s brave and very stubborn. She can be funny and a spitfire but in a good way. The way I could look into her eyes forever, and memorize the pattern of flecks of green and blue with flecks of gold, an-” Eliana was looking at me like with her mouth wide open and almost laughed.

“Are you laughing?” I asked.

“No no no, thanks, that’s all I needed to know. See it was that easy,” Eliana laughed. “You should go talk to her.”

“God, you sound like Dana. Makayla doesn’t want to talk to me. I took our whole friendship the wrong way, and I made a mistake,” I told Eliana. “I wish we were dating, but if I get to be in her life again as a friend... I’ll take it.”

“James. Just go talk to her, just figure this all out and set things straight,” Eliana said. “Plus, how do you know she doesn’t want to talk to you?”

“U-u-umm, I-I uh don’t know,” I stuttered.

“See. Go talk to her,” Eliana urged.

“You’re a real pain in my ass sometimes, Eliana,” I laughed.

“Yeah I know, it’s so much fun,” Eliana joked. “Alright, you go to the party and talk to Makayla, and text me later tonight and tell me what happens.”

“Oh, I’ll text,” I said. “I may have to call and blame you for ruining my life.”

“Alright, I ‘m headed to Noah’s. I’ll talk to you later,” Eliana said.

“Love you, El,” I said. “Have fun.”

Eliana walked away and held a thumbs up.

I continued to walk to Aaron’s house. It wasn’t that far away, so it only took about fifteen minutes.

I knocked and walked into Aaron’s house. I’ve been friends with him for about three or four years, but this is the first time I’ve been inside his house.

It was like a mansion. It was giant and had multiple paintings on the walls. The house was mixed with golden, white, black, and beige walls and details.

“Wow!” I exclaimed.

“I know. Cool right?” Aaron walked down the steps from upstairs and jumped down four steps to land right in front of me. “Welcome to mi casa.”

“This place is phenomenal, Aaron. Are your parents rich? Are you rich?” I shouldn’t have asked that. Seemed better to say in my head.

“Uh yeah, they got their money in very different ways. My dad is a bank robber and my mom is a cat burglar,” My eyes widened. I was befuddled.

“Oh, for real?” I asked. “I won’t snitch, but I just want to know.”

“Yeah of course. No man, I’m messing with you, makes me scared that you would help an accomplice of two criminals, but funny,” Aaron replied. “But for real, my mom is a lawyer, and my dad works in pharmaceuticals.”

“Oh, that makes more sense,” I said.

“Yeah, well make yourself at home for now, and enjoy the party,” Aaron said.

“Is Makayla here?” I asked.

“Yeah, she came about twenty or thirty minutes ago,” Aaron replied. “She’s been talking with people a lot, but she’s somewhere with Hera and Reva.”

“Okay okay,” I said nervously. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem, enjoy the party,” Aaron walked away and I walked around the party for a little while, I saw a lot of people I knew. I saw Lyla. I saw Leonard sadly. I saw Vicki. I saw Richard. Then I looked over to Hera and Reva, talking to Makayla. My eyes widened and she looked over at me. I slid behind a wall to get away from her sight, and my heart paced faster than The Flash could get food from Texas Roadhouse.

“Hey James,” Makayla said softly. I kept my position up against the wall. “James, it’s fine. I’m still a little irritated, but I can’t stay mad at you for too long.”

“Oh, me? Nervous? Pfft, ha! I’m fine. I’m okay,” I said.

“Sure,” she said.

“Look Makayla, I am so sor-”

“No. Don’t do that,” Makayla interrupted. “I don’t need nor do I want an apology.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Good, I’ll be back soon, I’m gonna go talk to Aaron real quick,” Makayla said. “Go find Hera and Reva for me. I lost them a few minutes ago.”

“Okay, will do,” I said.

She walked away and my heart slowed down. But I still felt nervous and anxious for some reason. I walked around the party a little more and walked up to Hera and Reva.

“Hey,” they looked over at me and they were not too thrilled to see me. “How’s everything going?”

“Good, no thanks to you,” Hera replied. “Why are you here, J?” Reva asked.

“I wanted to have some fun and patch things up with Makayla, and I need your guys’ help,” I said.

“And why should we help you?” Hera asked.

“Because it would be the right thing to do?” I suggested.

“What’s the real reason, James?” Reva asked.

“I want to be with her. I like her a lot and I know I blew it, but I want to make things right with her and be with her,” I explained.

“Oh wow,” Hera said.

“It was so obvious,” Reva said.

“Wait, you knew?” I exclaimed.

“Um. Yeah! It was so obvious and I thought you and Makayla would be good together,” Reva replied.

“Did you want to tell me?” Hera asked.

“It wasn’t my secret to tell, plus I thought it was obvious to see, so I thought you already knew,” Reva explained.

“True,” Hera said.

“So, you like her,” Reva said. “Do you like her?”

“Yes, after thinking it over and over in my head, I realized I’ve liked her. I’ve always liked her.”

“Tell her. Tell her. Tell her. Tell her,” Hera begged.

“I will, but I need a little help from you guys,” I said.

“What do you need help with?” Reva asked. “What to say? How to tell her? What to do?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“I have a feeling this is going to get hard,” Hera said.

“That’s what she said,” I mumbled.

“Focus James,” Hera snapped.

“Right, sorry, sorry,” I said.

“She’s coming over,” Reva smiled at me and I looked at her awkwardly.

“Shut up, shut u-... Hey Makayla,” I said awkwardly.

“Oh hey, wanna go upstairs?” Makayla asked.

Reva and Hera began to giggle and Makayla’s eyes widened. “Oh god, not like that! Not like that, I’m sorry. There are just games and stuff up there... Ugh, do you want to go upstairs with me?”

“Umm yeah of course,” I stumbled.

She grabbed my hand and we ran upstairs. I looked back downstairs at Hera and Reva, and they were holding thumbs up and I put mine up too.

“So, how’s it been lately?” Makayla asked.

“Good,” I lied. “You?”

“Oh, good.” I looked at her, while she was looking down. But I could tell she was lying. It seems to be what we both do best.

“Yeah,” I looked at her and I saw she wasn’t in her best mood today. “So how’re you and Leonard?”

“Oh we broke up,” she replied. “What, you’re not dating Leonard?” I asked.

“Nope, I broke up with him a day after... You and Leonard got into it,” she replied. “Again.” She laughed.

“Oh well, are you okay?”

“Yeah I’m fine, it’s all good. You don’t have to be concerned.”

“I do. You’re my best friend and I want what’s best for you and to make sure you’re okay,” I said. “But if I’m being honest, he was an asshole.”

She smiled a little. I guess that was the right thing to say, I don't want a repeat of two months ago. “Yeah, he was. He IS an asshole. Always will be, so it was probably better we broke up.”

“Do you still like him?”

“No, he is an asshole, and I hate him more than anything and anyone obviously, plus I don’t want to be with him because he’ll just make me feel worse.”

I grabbed my side again. *I know, right? Two months later and everything still hurts.* “Well, it still sucks.”

“Thanks.” She twirled her hair and tucked it behind her ear.

I know this! I watched this. What I mean is I've heard that one of the signs a girl likes you. So I mean, maybe. But I can't get my hopes up just yet.

"No problem," I smiled. "What do you want to do now? We've been up here for fifteen minutes and just been talking for this time."

She laughed again, and hearing her laugh, I laughed too. I love her laugh. "I don't know, what do you want to do?"

"Oh god, not this, once this starts, there's no end," I joked.

"We could go outside," she suggested.

"Sure, but we just came up here, I thought there were games?"

"Eh, it's fine, outside is a lot better. The sky looks pretty right now."

"Oh okay." She grabbed my hand and dragged me down the stairs and when we got outside, no one was out there.

Thankfully.

It was quieter than inside the house, and we sat down on a curb. We sat there for hours, talking, joking, gossiping, sharing memories, and talking about summer plans. It was the greatest talk I've ever had with anyone. She began to clean herself up a little, by wiping off tortilla chip crumbs, and stared me in the eyes. She was quiet and just stared into my eyes. I stared back at her obviously and I looked at her cheeks, which were turning red at a quick pace. I could see them turning bright pink to red.

"Want to go back inside with everyone?" Makayla asked.

"Yeah yeah. Alright," I replied. "You go on in. I'll be in soon."

She got up from the step and walked to the door. She opened it and the music blared super loud. She stopped herself from going in. "See you later James." She turned towards the party and got one foot through the door.

I got up and called for her before she could go inside. "Makayla?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

I froze, she was staring "I-I... I like you," I froze and my brain just...turned off. "I like you."

Makayla closed the door, and she looked back at me, "Yeah I know dummy."

"I like you, like... Wait, you know?" I exclaimed.

She walked back over to the steps and sat down next to me. "Of course, I knew, it seemed a little obvious after the Leonard situation."

"So if you knew, why didn't you say anything?"

"Why didn't you, James? Why didn't you tell me how you were feeling?"

"Cause I was always worrying that it might not be true. Cause I like you. I'm sorry I'm saying 'like' and 'cause' a lot. But when we were friends, throughout the years, I began to develop feelings for you. Honestly, I was scared and thought you wouldn't like me back and I wish I didn't start to like you because we've been amazing friends. And I wanted to tell you for a while, but then you started dating Leonard, I knew you didn't like me. I was scared."

"Well when we kissed, sort of, when we were hanging out, I knew you liked me, but you were with Chloe. So I didn't know how to react or what to do."

“I was always scared you didn’t like me, so I was stupid and dated Chloe. And because I lied, my heart ached. I wanted to tell you, but I was so stupid.” I looked up at the stars for some reason. I couldn’t look her in the eyes.

“No, we were both stupid. I should’ve told you. Or I shouldn’t have dated the asshole of the school. I should’ve just told you.”

“No, no, I should’ve asked you out. We’ve been friends for so long, and I didn’t want to jeopardize that. I loved hanging out with you, but I never really knew. I should’ve been less of a guy who was crushing on you, and more of a best friend, cause we’re best friends, and I can’t lose that.”

She looked away from me, and I continued to stare at the stars. I didn’t know what to say anymore. I wanted to pour out everything in my heart , telling her how I felt. But something was holding me back. “There’s one question I have.”

I lowered my gaze to her face. Her eyes. “Yeah?”

“How come you're telling me this?” She asked. “Why now? I know you’ve liked me for so long. And it took you so long to tell me.”

“Because I really liked you, this seemed like the best moment, with it being the last week of school and this is the first time we’ve talked in a month,” I replied.

“Fair point, but why do you like me?” Makayla asked.

“Do y-... Did you like me?” asked.

“You’re so stupid,” she laughed.

“Haha. I’m stupid? Yeah, I’m very stupid,” I laughed.

“Yes. Yes, you are.”

There was silence for a second. Just listening to the muted music and crowd inside Aaron's mansion. "Oh wait. You never answered my question," I said.

"You didn't answer mine." She shot me this look, like an almost smile. Like a grin, but not really. It was cute.

"Answer mine, and then I'll answer yours." I bargained. "Fine, I do-... Did. You were amazing. You've treated me better as a friend than anyone else I've known, and you are amazing for that. But that was before you decided to be a douchebag," she replied.

"Oh yeah, I'm sorry about that," I apologized. "I was dumb, stupid, and a selfish prick if that makes it better. But I am very sorry."

"Yeah, it's fine," she said. "Sorry for calling you a selfish prick."

"Don't be sorry. I was," I responded. "I'm still sorry for all of the things I said and did."

"Now answer my question."

"What question?" I asked.

"James, please," Makayla begged. "Tell me."

"I can't Makayla."

"James! Please. I-I want to know, please!" Makayla shouted.

She began to tear up, and so did I. "No Makayla, I can't lose you!"

"Tell me goddamnit!"

"Fine! Fine, you want to know how I feel? I don't just like you. I love you because you can make me happy, whenever I feel sad. You can always make me happy. Your voice is beautiful, and I could never get tired of listening to what you are thinking about. And how

you are so kind and sweet to everyone even if they aren't to you. You can always calm me down and bring a smile to my face, even when I'm having a bad day. You can be funny and feisty. And most of all, the way you've been my best friend throughout high school and half of middle school, where I've gone through the most hell and you were so helpful," I replied. "You know I didn't fall in love with you when I first saw or met you. I was very hesitant to talk to you. Not that I hated you, but my gut was telling me something that I couldn't figure out. And after a month I did. My gut was telling me that you and I were gonna be very great friends. But with a twist. What it didn't say was the fact you would be the girl I love most in life. And whether it's as a couple, or just as friends. And I was hoping it wouldn't be the last one. I was always trying to distance myself from you, but I couldn't, and I always wanted to be around you, and talk to you."

"James I-I don't know what to say," Makayla put her face in her hands. I didn't know what to do.

"You don't have to say anything," I smiled.

"Yeah, but I want to," Makayla put her hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. "You are amazing and sweet, and I could've never asked for a better person to be in my life. I used to feel the same, and I-... I want to tell you that I'm so glad I met you. Without you, I don't think I would've been able to get advice from someone better than you. And I can tell you that though it would be sweet to say 'everyone deserves a James of their own,' I'm glad I have my own James, someone who knows how to treat me right and can always make me laugh."

“Thanks, Makayla,” I said. “You know the party's still going. I'm not interested in going back in for a bit, but if you want to go back to the party, you can go.”

“No, I want to stay out here with you,” she looked me in the eyes, and I looked back into her eyes. “Out here is better anyway.”

“Do you like me too?” I asked.

“I have to say it again, you're so stupid,” Makayla said. “Just to make sure, why?”

I was genuinely confused. I know I'm stupid, but I'm curious as to what she means. Don't get me wrong, I know I'm stupid, but I'm not why it applies right now.

“I've been your friend for so long. Yes. Have I dated someone? Yes. But you were always the one I'd talk to after school. You were always the one I would stay up till after midnight calling. You were always the one I would share my secrets with. I always asked you questions, like ‘Have you ever had a girlfriend?’, or ‘What do you look for in a girlfriend?’ Of course, I like you. I was always nervous that you didn't like me. Because I would always ask you ‘Are you gonna ask out your crush?’ and then you say yes, so I get excited. But you never do it. You never did it, James. I love you too, but it took so long. And I am so sorry. This whole time I've liked you and normally around people, I'm strong, confident, and quieter. But with you I get weak, I stutter sometimes, and I feel like I can talk to you for hours and hours on end without getting bored or sick of it,” Makayla laid her head on my shoulder. So at that moment, I did what felt natural to do, I looked at her and hugged her.

“You don't have to be sorry Makayla,” I reassured her. “This one's on me. I just wish I could understand why the girls don't ask out the guys, I mean in middle school the girl wanted to date the guy more, but the guy had to be the one to ask her out. And I

wanted to do that, but every time I was around you, I forgot that I even wanted to date you in the future. I just wanted to be with you then in the moment. I forgot about the future because all there was, was the 'now.'"

"Oh wow, James."

When she looked up, she was crying. But they weren't sad tears. They were happy tears. She then formed the most beautiful smile, so I smiled back, and I moved my hand closer to hers. She began to move her hand closer to mine and we held each other's hand, and I looked over at her. I couldn't stop smiling. I felt like the Joker, but not sociopathic or homicidal. I was just happy. She leaned in slowly. I leaned in and closed my eyes, and then everything was silent. I couldn't hear the party or the neighbor's dogs barking and howling into the night. Nothing.

All I could hear was silence.

At this moment, I was with the one. Makayla Emerson.

And I was having my moment. *The Kiss*. This was it. The moment Dana and Eliana said.

As we got closer, we finally kissed, and our heartbeats slowed down. They were beating fast until we kissed, and we got calm.

And I could feel my mind just blanking, and all my thoughts just disappeared.

Gone.

She backed up slowly and it was so quiet, I could hear my heartbeat from how quiet it was. I stood there, just rubbing the back of my neck.

"W-wow," she muttered. "Yeah. That was..."

“Great.” She finished the sentence for me.

“I was gonna say amazing, but anything else works.”

“Yeah it was... Amazing.”

“I love you Jameson Carrelli.”

“I love you too Makayla Emerson.” We held each other for God knows how long,
but it was comforting.

I had the greatest night I could’ve ever dreamed of. “Maybe we’re *not* just friends.”
She joked.

“Yeah, maybe not.”

Ashley Hernandez

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

What's Your Impact?

What's Your Impact?

Where is the place you call home? Most people would say their home is where their family is, but what if you leave your family for a better life? Well, that is the case for most immigrants. Take my mom as an example. She was an immigrant for many years, and most of my friends don't know that. She left her home in Mexico and traveled for days to get to the United States of America. She said her goodbyes to her family, and she left. She didn't know where she was going; she only knew to go North. The trip caused her a lot of physical and mental pain. Some of that pain was that she wasn't allowed to contact her family for three days. She had nothing with her; all she had were the clothes on her back. When she finally arrived in the great United States of America, she was in Texas. She had two options: to stay in Texas or go somewhere else, farther from the border, farther away from her family. She decided to go elsewhere to increase her chance of surviving in a world of harsh people and new differences.

The second she arrived, she slept almost the whole night and day. After she had slept for hours, she finally called her mom to let her know she was alive and breathing. My grandma said when she got the call, she broke down in tears and thanked God for caring for my mom. My mom stayed with some friends who also came with her from Mexico. She went to work daily, making money for her family in Mexico. She always gave some part of her money to her family no matter what. My mom, while working, became pregnant with my older brother. His father was never present in his life and still isn't. She doesn't like to talk about that time because she was hurt in multiple ways, and it's something that she hopes will never happen to my brother and me. Also, at this time, her older brother joined her in the USA. She was a single mom for five years until she met my dad.

A couple of months later, my mom was trying to get full custody of my brother, with my dad becoming my brother's legal father. She didn't win, but she got most custody without my dad becoming his legal father. My mom got married to my dad, but she hadn't become a citizen yet. When I was three years old, my mom took my brother, me, and my dad to Mexico to meet her family. It was the first time I ever saw my mom cry with joy. At that time, she hadn't seen them for almost a decade.

Coming back, my mom was nervous that she wouldn't be able to enter the USA, but she was able to come back. Once, she had to go back to Mexico, but she got stuck at the border, so my dad took me to my grandparents, and I stayed there for a couple of days. To get my mom, my dad drove for 26 hours down and back without stopping. Now that's true love. When they got back, I was glad that my mom was back. I didn't know what was happening, but I just knew it had to be something good. We still visit my family in Mexico every year since then, but years later, when I was nine years old, my mom became a citizen.

The process was long; however, I still remember the day when I skipped school to be there with my mom. If you didn't know, to become a citizen of the USA, you must study around 100 questions and answer three of those questions on a test. My mom took the test, and she passed! She had finally become a citizen of the great US of A.

My mom, as a citizen, continues to work hard and give money to our family in Mexico to make their dreams come true. Something my mom always would do to make one family member's dreams come true is buy something for my younger cousin. I would get jealous and say, "Oh, you're going to buy that for them, but not my things?" I would always say something like that growing up, and I never realized that when my cousin gets a gift, she lights up with joy. With that joy comes her smile. It could light up this world. My cousin doesn't have the opportunity, or things that I do, such as a laptop, air conditioning, books, nine pairs of shoes, a sink with running water, lots of education, and much more. What would a toy do for me when it does much more for her? So now, when I see that my mom gets something for her, I don't say anything because I know what a difference it makes for my cousin.

My mom made a big sacrifice that changed her whole life. It was a life-changing moment that if my mom chose to stay in Mexico, I wouldn't be here in the USA. She would have probably married someone in her small town, and

she would have 1-2 kids who are nothing like my brother and me. She wouldn't have the money she has now. My grandparents wouldn't have been able to take care of my older cousins and other family members without my mom's "big impact." A small impact on the world makes a "big impact" on my life. I believe that everyone has one "big impact" that affects everyone else's life most slightly is what I call a "small impact." My mother's "big impact" is crossing the border, and my dad's "big impact" is learning how to deal with being deaf. They happened at different times in their life. Mine hasn't happened yet, but I'm sure it will. So what will be your future impact that makes small ones to others?

Grace Herzog

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Pie of Death

For the first friendsgiving you're ever invited to, you make an apple pie. Not the premade crust apple pie or the stick-in-the-oven-and-be-done-with apple pie on sale for \$14.99 at Costco—your apple pie is authentic, time consuming. The type of pie infused with love by a grandma for her three grandchildren whose names all start with the letter M. A pie you'd see on Paula Dean's cooking show. A pie that says, "please invite me back to the next friendsgiving so I can feel like I belong."

Time Left for the Homemade Apple Pie in the Oven: 25 minutes

You braid your hair using your reflection in the kitchen sink, not wanting to be away from the oven for too long. To be organized, you set your purse on the island, texting your mom again to make sure she knows to pick you up in half an hour. Punctuality is key, you think. You wash your hands one more time and open the oven door. Painting a mix of beaten up egg and butter onto the half-baked crust, the kitchen begins to smell like how you think a Hallmark movie would: festive and clean.

Time Left for the Homemade Apple Pie in the Oven: 15 minutes

You check on the pie every 10 minutes, turning on the oven light to watch as the filling bubbles out from the pockets of the crust. The small cut you got from chopping the waxy Honeycrisp apples earlier itches to be scratched.

Time Left for the Homemade Apple Pie in the Oven: 5 minutes

Pacing around the kitchen, your body grows cold as your feet hit the tiled floor with each step over and over again. You fidget with your french braid, pulling strands from the intricate design until the braid falls out all together, annoyed by the attention. It's too late to rebraid it—the pie will be done soon. You leave your hair knotted.

Time Left for the Homemade Apple Pie in the Oven: 3 minutes

Waiting for the timer to go off, you lean against the cool, marbled kitchen counter. Any moment now, you think.

Time Left for the Homemade Apple Pie in the Oven: 2 minutes

You mistake the ring of a phone call for the oven alarm beginning to beep.

"We think Tyler is dead," your mom tells you in a whisper when you pick up the phone, her voice frantic, shaking. "I'm driving home to pick you up and then we're heading over to Aunt Sandy's." For a minute, words don't come. The fan of the oven is the only noise you process.

"My apple pie isn't done yet," you respond.

Time After The Homemade Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 15 minutes

When you arrive at the house, six people sit around the living room coffee table. There's a small gasp as they take you in. Your uncle curses under his breath that you shouldn't be here, muttering how the scene's too morbid for kids until he's given a look by his wife and realizes his words are too loud. Crouching on the ground, the carpet feels rough, as if the bristles are prying into the skin not covered by your dress. You play with the leaves of a house plant as your mom is pulled aside in the kitchen. The hushed words of "his body is still there" creep from the walls to where you sit, filling every fiber of your being. You're told not to look or enter Tyler's room.

Time After The Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 25 minutes

Since you're by the window, you look out, observing the driveway lined with cars. It looks the same as the time you lit sparklers for the Fourth of July with Tyler. You imagine the golden flame of the sparklers and Tyler's annoyance when you waved yours too close to his face, the laughter he had when your sparkler went out before his. Your gut starts to feel hollow, so you redirect your attention to the hot apple pie left to cool on the kitchen counter. *What will your friends say when you're late?*

Time After The Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 35 minutes

It's all but silent until Anna runs into the house, body shaking from breaths that won't come. Her voice is wispy when she falls on her knees. Someone you don't know falls beside her and rubs her back.

"It's okay. It's okay. Shhh, it's okay," they repeat. You look away and imagine your pie's delicate latticework.

Time After The Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 45 minutes

There's now ten other people in the living room: neighbors, family, police—eleven if you count Tyler's dog, Romeo, who lies on the floor, head slumped. The two people who live at the house across the road stand in an awkward manner by the front door, lips hesitant to ask too many questions but minds ablaze with curiosity. The words "drug addiction" are unspoken but you can sense it in their eyes of fake pity. You know in the back of their minds they think he had it coming.

Time After The Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 55 minutes

Tyler was the cousin you were supposed to get closer with in your twenties. When you both moved out and were unfamiliar with adulthood, you were going to get through it together. You would become friends—real friends—and bond over a similar childhood of a strict family who were only strict because they loved you. A part of you believes Tyler will walk out of his room, say it was all some sick prank, and drive with you to friendsgiving—that your future with him is still a reality.

Time After The Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 65 minutes

Your mom wants you out of the house when the tall people in white hazmat suits pull a body bag out of their van. Your uncle offers to drop you off at friendsgiving.

"I have to get my apple pie first," you say.

Time After The Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 185 minutes

Only two people seem to acknowledge that you showed up. You offer your apple pie but everyone is too full from turkey and pumpkin cheesecake. They've already eaten desert.

Time After The Apple Pie is Out of the Oven: 4325 minutes

The apple pie spoils on the kitchen counter. The once golden egg wash is gone, tarnished by the wear of time. Its flimsy crust slaps you with visions of the light silicon the men wore to collect his body. Even the smell vanished, replaced by the faint lingering of expired bread. You throw it in the trash.

Shangri-La Hou

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

In The Metropolitan Museum of Art

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art

I spend lifetimes looking for you. You know that the camera is not my medium of choice, but today I train the lens on each rendered body with all the seriousness of a real artist. I want to capture us in Pierre-Auguste Cot's shining man and woman, some caricature of love. I take photos of a male marble figure for myself to reference because I believe that tracing the human hands of masters will bring me closer to whatever uncharted territory we have crossed.

But here: where the most lauded portraitures of our kind are set to hang, I am standing at *Bridge over a Pond of Water Lilies*, begging for forgiveness. Forgiveness for my struggle to mold into art anything that could come close to you. Forgiveness because I know your heart lies closer to Monet and the quiet grain landscapes of George Inness; for calling myself an artist as I placed faces on paper and called it us. For believing that a body of water held less weight than a body of flesh—forgive me.

Let us sit, together, at the turn of a creek. Tell me about its fish, its sound, where it came from and where it's headed; about the trees hugging its edges and the fledgling robins in its branches. This love is mine and yours and should be made from you and I; Teach me how to see as you do so that I may create it again and again and again.

Petrichor

There are days I need something just like this. Not some scrupulously sanded-down segment of a second, the way diamonds are carved out and cleansed of character.

Right now, I don't need the eyes or the brain or even the living heart. Give me the whole body so that one part may be something because of another. I don't need pulchritude, serendipity, the replacement of words we cannot yet touch.

Give me something a tear of rain understands
as it kisses the ground: thirst, love, the weight
of its death hanging in the earth.

—as we are leaping into the jaws of the bear

We move through the world
unsmoothly:

less like an eel, flexing its
powerful and undulating spine
against the great ocean,
pushing back; less like

ribbons moving through
water, less like the easy rhythm of
low tide—less like the way
an albatross finds the current
and rides it

Understand me:
we move through the world
unsmoothly, slicing our skin on
the riverbed as we are
pushed back and
thrown to the side
by greater beasts

Understand me:
we are more like the trout
swimming upstream, how they live
in gasps—as they are flailing up to take in
what will kill them—

Birds

Even in the absence of you, they are here.
Outside every window they are flitting, moving fast,
beats of feather and sound light against the eardrum.

In the absence of you, I am learning how to be sensitive to life.
While the swallow retreats into its creek-side cavity,
an eager nuthatch explores the lengths of trees until it knows
everything, and the sturdy cottonwoods are swaying
to a gentle rhythm, and the crane takes off with her speared fish
into the sinking sun, turning softly.

I can see them all. You see them, too, even in the absence of me,
because the earth offers its beauty to anyone who dares to step outside.

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

Decay

A crown of
Black curls
Cascades down;

Speckled brown eyes
Hold an entire universe;

Eyelashes become
A pair of robins wings;

Rosy lips
Spread wide

As laughter
Fills the room
With a warm embrace;

And just for a second,
I forget—

That her crown of curls
Is shrinking,
That her speckled brown eyes
Are dull with exhaustion,
That her eyelashes
flit over graying skin,
That her rosy lips
are cracking,
And she's laughing
Instead of eating.

As I remember,
the spirited laughter fades,
Replaced
By the guttural shrieks—
Of a dying girl.

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

Weathering the Storm

Beaten down by bitter
winds of the vain,

Her body stood an oak—
Weathered by eternal storms,

Anchored by the tangle
of her past beneath the surface;

Roots that send a liquid
memory of the dark she's outgrown—

A wall of armor shields
her from the world:

Her barrier between truth—
and whispers—spoken to the wind,

Shedding the pieces—
—Too broken—
—Too burnt—
—Too soft—

Shedding the irreparable
so that she may forget.

Her body stands an oak
marked by the tempest,
but not weakened—

Branches reach above,
pleading with the heavens,
offering herself to the sky.

— Vulnerability for freedom —

Her arms stretched outwards—
—No shield—
—No barriers—
Risking that sharp rejection
for a breath of the new;

Branches blistered by a light

-Too bright-
-a heat- too great-
crumble away:
ashes of a lesson learned;

Branches ripped away by a wind
-Too fierce-
- a pull- too strong-
tumble down:
fragments of innocence lost;

Branches rotted by showers
-Too steady--
-a damp- too unbearable-
dissolve into sorrow:
Tears of the forgotten;

Branches reaching out-
searching for an answer
in the stars-
fall away,

Leaving behind
an empty space
-a hollowed out dare-
that waits
-stagnant-
until she is brave enough
to try again;

Until she has enough
courage to reach out,
to face the storm
that batters her-
endlessly.

Until she is once again
willing to be broken
So that she may
-one day-
reach the sky.

Riley Hunter

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Short Story

From Pumpkin to Peppermint

From Pumpkin to Peppermint

Everything and nothing is ready. The floors are clean, the sheets are folded, and the TV is off the stand but still, so much needs to be done. She lights an autumn candle which helps, but something is still missing. She runs through her list again: “linens, clothes, TV..., nightstand! That’s what I’m missing,” she says.

Florence is the most organized disorganized person there is. But this is different; everything needs to be perfect this last time. She folds his last collared shirt and sets it on top of the pile with the rest of his stuff. Now, his visit can be efficient. Florence knows that if he's there for over an hour ... he can't be there for over an hour.

The two were attached by the hip for the last twelve years and it made perfect sense since people always say opposites attract. Connor and Florence were textbook definitions of that kind of love. Her dark complexion and features directly contrast his pale skin with icy blue eyes. Their physical opposition made their emotional connection that much stronger. His muscular stature contradicts his soft, comforting eyes. Those eyes brought her back to bed with him. He’s petting her hair as she silently cries. He reaches for the remote off the bedside table and knocks the IVF needles to the floor. His glasses rest on his copy of *The Notebook*, which lies next to the picture frame of the gender reveal.

Now that all his things are taken care of, Florence decides to get her things in order. Making her own checklist, she hangs her wool sweaters to dry, bakes oatmeal cookies, and then shifts to her appearance. Standing in front of the mirror, Florence starts with a skin tint. She does light blush and bronzer but decides to skip mascara. No matter how the interaction goes, she wants to look good for him. She wants him to miss her. She puts on her orange sweater with the pumpkin smiley face and sprays their favorite perfume.

Now that everything is perfect, she can relax. As Florence walks from her bathroom to the living room, she picks at her nail beds. She sits down in front of the freshly steamed couch and allows her mind to race. She runs through all the potential threads of the conversation, but one what-if stays at the front of her mind. Stroking her fingers through the carpet, she envisions him begging her to try again. Promising they can overcome loss, swearing that two terrible things can't happen to two nice people. Before the scenario finishes, she hears footsteps from outside her door.

The second hand completes its rotation. On the dot, he rings the doorbell. She composes herself and then waits ten seconds before opening the door. Right as it opens, she says, “All your stuff is by the couch.” She needed to get the words out before his charming appearance turned the words she had planned into a bowl of alphabet soup. Connor wore a navy blue long-sleeve shirt that made his eyes look more like sapphire than icy blue and hugged his muscles in a way they didn't used to be defined three months ago.

“You didn't have to do all of that,” he says.

“It was no trouble.”

The silence was as intense as the pumpkin scent from her perfume. Florence never anticipated this tense interaction, the two never used to have a problem talking. Stuck in the doorway with waves of emotion crashing onto her head, blocking her vision of how to move forward.

“Can I do anything to help?” she says.

“You’ve done enough, pumpkin.”

It had been months since she heard him call her that. Still, this wasn't entirely unpredictable. It felt as if the scenarios she had imagined were coming to life. “I’m just standing here. Let me help.”

“You have helped enough.”

His words had a weight to them that she didn't know how to counter, so Florence just stood and stared into his eyes. No matter how much pain it brings her to look at his eyes, the eyes that perfectly match the most painful memory, she can't help but stare. Behind them, she could see the pain it brought him to use such a hard tone when

talking to her, but he needed to have a strong front to hide the soft spot he held underneath.

Pacing back and forth in front of the couch, Florence runs back through her checklist as he carries the first load to his car and once again remembers his nightstand. The one thing she couldn't get herself to organize. The last piece of him left in their safe space.

He returns with the flowers matching the bouquet from their wedding day.

"I know how hard this season is for you and thought that this might help," he says, handing her the flowers.

"I can't accept this. I can't see them sitting on the countertop without thinking of you. I don't need a constant reminder of the best thing in my life ending."

"Just accept the gift," he says.

"No."

"Fine. Don't keep the flowers." Connor pauses. "I'll take them out with another load."

Florence moves to the barstools at the kitchen countertop, dreading the next six minutes. She has six minutes to compose herself before opening old wounds. More like six minutes to compose herself before further opening the wounds he already scratched the surface of. Florence thanks her morning self for not choosing to wear mascara. How is she going to have this conversation again? Before she begins to question the direction of their conversation, Connor walks back into the apartment.

"I think that's everything."

"Your nightstand."

"Could I get that after we talk?"

"That's probably best since I didn't pack that stuff yet," tapping the barstool next to her.

Connor sits down and then takes one of the oatmeal raisin cookies, and despite the small grimace on his face, his whole body relaxes. She could see his brain behind his complex blue eyes, trying to decide how to start this conversation.

"Pumpkin, how can we pay off all this money if we aren't together anymore?"

"The same way we were doing it before."

"You just want me to come over once a month and collect \$400 for the next twelve years?"

"Unless you want me to pick up the money? Do you want to get a loan?"

"No, Florence, I want you."

"And I want a baby."

Their gaze is locked, but not a word is spoken. Connor never responded to Florence's statement. Even if he had heard those words before, her tone made it seem definitive. No amount of flowers, eating her cookies that she always burns, or compliments on her perfume would change how badly she wants to become a mother. She could no longer be persuaded.

Everyone told Florence she was meant to be a mother. The way she carried herself throughout the last twelve years, always caring for others more than she cared for herself. That characteristic rubbed off on Connor. He had become a more selfless man, and Florence could see it in their conversation. Despite his efforts to convince her to try again, Connor knew that it would be best for Florence to walk away; but she had never done something like this, something that benefits herself and hurts someone else.

The clock's tick strays from its typical rhythm, simultaneously going in slow motion and is a ticking time bomb, as Florence struggles to decide what she wants. Thousands of conversations about the future. With or without Connor. With or without children. Desperate for both kinds of love, baby or Connor. She's had Connor for 12 years but a baby for 12 hours. How can she choose the rest of her life based on 12 hours with a baby? Nothing was ever the same after. She changed, he changed, and they changed. If she could go back to before the baby, before the debt, before the silence, then the choice would be clear. But she can't. Clearly, the ball is now in her court, but this decision has more weight than she anticipated. Florence always knew what the choice was; she just didn't want to admit it.

"You can have a baby with me. We just have to try again."

"You know I can't do that. I can't go through that kind of loss with you again."

His face shifts from his usual poised soft smile to doe eyes, "fine."

She could see the gears in his brain turning again, trying to generate a different response to the same statement. Connor may know what he wants, for Florence to be happy even if that means without him. But, in an ideal world, the two could try again for a baby - just like every other couple their age. This is not the ideal world.

"Can you do one more thing for me?" He waits for her soft smile, "take this." Connor slides a check for \$25,000 on the countertop to Florence.

"No. What... How did you even do this?"

"I know it's not all the money, but that's all the bank would loan me. Use this to pay off the debt; that way, I don't have to come by every month or mail you a check."

None of her scenarios predicted the type of conversation these two had. When Florence played through those scenarios, she saw the baby in Connor's face. Now every time she sees him in person, she can't help but see the baby. A constant reminder of the biggest loss of her life. Even if he reminds her of the baby, Connor melts her in a way that makes it hard to resist going back to him.

"If I take this check, then I will never see you again?" Florence's mind has gone blank. How could he go from wanting to have a baby with her to never wanting to see him again in such a short time?

"Never is dramatic. I'm all in Florence. You say the words, and I'm there. But I'm done playing this game. It's not fair for you to pick and choose when you want me. You don't want my baby or my love, but you want my presence. You can't get everything, and I get nothing. I'm not some puppy who is waiting at your feet to get attention."

Florence grabs the check from off the countertop and stares at the 6" by 9" paper, "We will always have something special, you know that, Connor."

Without hesitation, Connor goes to the bedroom. Florence can only hear the sound of drawers opening, then he storms out with his nightstand in hand. All of his belongings rattling within the drawer and then Connor goes through the door and shuts it behind him without so much as a word goodbye or a final look back.

This time Florence's eyes are as large as a deer in headlights. Stuck once again with only her scenarios, Florence runs through more potential conversation threads. This time there are no what-ifs, this time, Florence is relieved. She didn't have to leave Connor because he had left her.

For the first time since they met, Florence lit a twisted peppermint candle and relaxed on her bed that was perfectly centered with one night stand. A nightstand with a check that allows her to move forward.

Augustine Hwang

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Bob Kohler

Category: Flash Fiction

Cactus Spines

People say I avoid problems. Actually, it's mostly my mom who says that. But , after she had to leave work to bring me the backpack I forgot at home, she yelled at me for being a wimp in front of the whole class. After that, everyone made fun of me.

Ew, it's Cadmus, that little weirdo. Let's get out of here before his mom shows up and screams at us.

Nah, she doesn't like him either.

Mrs. Paulina joined in on it too. *Cadmus, stop playing games on your iPad. Do your homework, or at least pretend to. I would hate to have to call your mother and make her leave work.*

All I could do was close my eyes, count to ten, and look away shamefully.

When calling me weirdo got old, the big kids started calling me Cactus. And just like that, with a brand, I was an outcast in school. No one talked to me or sat next to me at lunch. I ate my plain food, consisting of two slimy bananas covered in brownish spots, a lump of cold fish fingers, and an almond butter sandwich. I usually ended up throwing away everything except the sandwich and going to eat in Mr. E's room. He was a bald, wiry man with two long scars that trailed down the side of his face. Sometimes, I wanted to ask about them, but my courage always disappeared faster than water draining away. Mr. E didn't seem to like having to eat with a loser like me, so I left his classroom after the third lunch together.

As I exited the room and looked out at the rows of cold metal lockers, they seemed to stare back at me. I suddenly wanted to run back in the room and beg Mr. E to be my friend. But my mom was right, she had always been right, I was a coward through and through. I closed my eyes, counted to ten, and looked away.

It was times like those, wandering the halls by myself, that I truly felt like a Cactus, secluded and warped, shunned by the other plants. It wasn't fair that sunflowers had those big yellow petals that glowed like molten gold, and roses smelled fresh and floral and shone scarlet too. All cactuses had were sharp, terrifying spines. Spines that scared everyone away, spines that kept it at a distance.

I wanted to get rid of my spines and be like the other plantss.

When school ended for the year, I began to pluck my spikes out one at a time, everything that made others wrinkle their noses when they saw me. I cut my hair to whatever tousled style was popular, lost my glasses and braces, went to the gym for the first time. I practiced the airy, nonchalant voice all the popular kids used when they pretended they didn't care what others thought of them.

When summer was over and I looked in the mirror the morning before school started, my breath caught in my throat. I looked confident, cool, everything I never was. I looked like I belonged.

All conversation paused when I entered the school bus. Every jealous eye stared up at me. For the first time, I was the center of attention.

And I stayed there. For the next two years, I had everything I dreamed of: the boys wanted to be me, the girls wanted to be with me, and no one even knew that I was the same kid they used to bully. Finally, I was a normal flower just like the rest of them. I even had a girlfriend, and I loved her as much as anyone possibly could. If she was a flower, I was the bee crawling along her smooth purple petals.

Unfortunately, I wasn't the only person who thought that.

The third year of our relationship, it all fell apart.

I went to my friend Gavin's house, and that's when I saw it on his phone. So many exchanged messages between them. And I don't know if it was my fault or hers, but I felt torn open and pathetic like the dead flower you crush under your shoe. I felt . . . I couldn't place it, but I knew that feeling.

What should I have done? I should have confronted him, both of them, thrown that stupid phone into his face. I clenched my fists, gritted my teeth, and stood up with the worst intentions on my mind.

And then I realized what I was feeling. It was the same thing I felt every day when I was younger, when nobody sat

with me, when I had nobody at all. All the rage left me, replaced by the old feelings that I was a coward. A cactus might grow flowers, but it can never hide its spines.
I never confronted Gavin. I never gave him the punch he deserved. I only closed my eyes, counted to ten, and put the phone down.

Sky Jacobson

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Flash Fiction

One Out of Many

One out of many, that's what I am: one singular individual out of this colossal army, all with one common goal, protecting our country against our enemies. But how do I play into all of this war, or even this battle?

When you look at this as a whole, I am a singular thing, a grain of sand, a water droplet, a small planet. I am never given a thought twice, not even once. Yet what I am a part of, the golden beaches, the colossal oceans, the Universe, or in this case, the war—it's everything.

That's what I am thinking, and what I thought every time I stepped out of my tiny, insignificant tent. This is the last day of months and months of grueling travel. Today is the battle. As my foot lands on the soft padding of the snow, I think of my surroundings. What originally was the soft breeze of the autumn has become the sharp, icy frost that bites deeper into my skin every second. The four layers I'm wearing only seem to weigh me deeper and deeper into the snow. On each side is a mountain range that stretches far out into the distance. Thousands of tents stretch out over a mile-wide swath of this valley.

Suddenly, I catch the faint smell of breakfast. As always, it is a simple bread and cold soup. Yet, in this harsh environment, we get all we can. I quickly move to the back of the line. I try to focus on the scent of the food and try not to think, but I can't stop.

Do I really need to fight all out? Is it really necessary to act brave? I have a family. They depend on me. If I go all out in this battle, there is a high likelihood that I will die. Also, there are plenty of people who are going to do all they can, and carry the army to victory. Do I really need to take part? If one man out of 200,000 doesn't take part, it is not going to matter. I am nothing. These doubts swarm my mind as I fill up my bowl and quietly sit down beside a bunch of others, some quiet, others talking loudly: "Ha! When the enemies see me charging at them, they will run for their insignificant lives, while I will lead us to victory!"

Another snickers, "You mean because they see the atrocity known as your face. Instead of you going on about yourself and your insurmountable dreams, let's talk about how I will be the bravest of all and lead the army to victory."

While they continue on arguing about who is braver, I just chew on the dry bread and sip my soup.

After about twenty minutes, a loud bell rings through the entire area of camp. It is a deafening announcement for us to congregate and march towards our enemies. I go back to my tent, secure my spear and stand in my place. Soon we begin walking towards our enemies.

Everything looks the same on both sides of our army no matter how far we walk, just the same gray mountain range, the same frigid snow, and the same nasty wind that freezes your bones. It is as if we haven't walked at all. With boredom, the doubts come back. What should I do? Should I be brave and protect my country? Or should I hold back and not risk my precious life? Plenty of people are going all out, so I don't need to worry. But we can't just depend on others. If everyone thinks like that and holds back, we are going to be demolished.

After an hour of walking, I see our enemies. Except for our uniforms, we look the same: The way some stand so tall, sticking their chests out and a fierce expression on their unemotional faces, so ready to sacrifice themselves that it

seems reckless, and others who, despite trying to look tough, are just as scared and confused as I am. We are all the same, yet we are here to kill each other.

The two armies stop abruptly and face each other. For a second, time seems to have frozen. And the mess in my head became crazier than ever. What should I do? What should I do? It is the same question over and over again: should I let others do the fighting for me or should I do my best and sacrifice myself for my country if it comes to that point? What should I do? I have pondered for so long but I still don't have the answer.

Suddenly I take another perspective, I start thinking about the country I am here to protect and all its citizens. I remember the delectable smell of roasted pork as my wife and I walk slowly down the marketplace. I remember the way the sun sets perfectly on top of the gigantic capitol building. I remember the way my beautiful child and his friends run up and down the street shouting, playing tag. That's why I am here, to protect my beloved country and these things, these lives, these memories, so they are passed onto the next generation. Maybe I will die, but if I die knowing that I did something to protect this legacy, I'll die knowing that I did something right.

Instead of hiding behind others and letting them do all the brutal fighting for me, I should do all I can to protect these things I care for. My heart slows down as I am relieved from my indecision. Now, it is easy: Fight.

When the drums roar, I charge.

Rajeshwar Jaladi

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Debra Klevens

Category: Journalism

Navigating the world in silence

Navigating the world in silence

How students with hearing impairment are finding their ways to success at school.

Living in a world of silence is the common reality for those suffering from hearing impairment. According to the CDC, as many as 15% of school-age children have significant hearing loss in at least one ear. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH) face challenges in the classroom and in the extracurricular world.

Sophomore Katelynn Meyer has been in the DHH program since the age of four. Meyer was profoundly deaf at birth and unable to hear any sound for the first two years of her life.

“I have been in the DHH program for my whole life. I went to Ladue Early Childhood Center for my preschool. This is where I met a lot of my close friends, lifetime friends, and supporting adults. Then I attended Bellerive Elementary, followed by West Middle,” Meyer said. “Being in one school system not only helped me make great friends but also helped me to explore several resources offered at the schools.”

Due to her profound deafness, Meyer did not have luck with the hearing aids she tried for the first few years of her life. She then went on to get cochlear implants, which help her hear sounds but not understand words. Meyer relies on software, such as the Video Relay Service (VRS), where one can call an interpreter on the screen to interpret what the hearing person says. Additionally, she uses AVA app, which is an artificial-intelligence based translation app that captions what the speaker says.

“I communicate with others in American Sign Language (ASL). At school I get access to a Sign Language interpreter. When the teacher is teaching, I am able to learn by looking at the interpreter who is translating and signing what the teacher is saying into my language,” Meyer said. “At home my mom is the only one that knows ASL. My dad and my sister do not use ASL. I have to depend on my mom to communicate with them and she is the only one that truly understands me and what I am saying. It feels like I have never had a one-on-one conversation with my dad or my sister. It is very sad but it is very common for deaf kids to have this happen.”

One of the biggest challenges Meyer says she faces is communicating and making connections with other people. Myers has a lot of friends who already know or are learning ASL. Additionally they use VRS, texting and Facetime to communicate with each other when at home.

“At school we use a lot of sign language with friends. If I try to lip-read in a conversation, I get lost and confused. I feel left out when that happens. I use this when I am with my hearing friends,” Meyer said. “I hang out more with my friends who are deaf because they know our culture and language. My deaf friends and I do not have to worry about communication barriers. Throughout my schooling, my friends have been students in the DHH program that I met at preschool and they are the same students I am going to graduate high school with. My deaf friends and I are really close to each other; we know what is going on in each other’s life and when we have hard times. It is like a close-knit family where we can talk about anything with each other. Those friends are for a lifetime.”

According to Meyer, she can communicate with both hearing and non-hearing peers through some social media platforms. However, on many social media, there is no access for those with hearing impairment. For instance, on Tik Tok and YouTube, there are a lot of videos that do not have closed captions. Additionally, videos that use the

auto closed captions options are not accurate translations the majority of the time.”

“It is annoying to see the video and not be able to get the message like the hearing people,” Meyer said. “People can be talking, smiling, looking upset or excited [in the video], but you don’t know why or what it is all about and you cannot be a part of those emotions and experiences.”

Similarly, noisy environments such as classrooms, hallways, lunch rooms and football games make it even more difficult to understand other people, according to Meyer. Meyer prefers to communicate in ASL while talking one-on-one with people in the classroom. However, the situation in group discussions is different.

“In a general education classroom, [participation and working in small groups] is harder because I am trying to keep up with what everyone is talking about [despite] the background noise. It feels stressful to be in a group activity with hearing people and it does give me more anxiety. I do rely on my interpreter a lot in that setting,” Meyer said. “But in the DHH room, that is not an issue because everyone can understand what we are saying to each other.”

Meyer suggests that students working in a group [involving a DHH student] can sit in a circle to make sure the hearing-impaired student can view the interpreter, keep the noise level low and talk slowly and clearly. Additionally, while making videos meant for the whole class or the entire school, students must include closed captions or interpreters so that DHH students can understand their content.

“Without closed captions or an interpreter, they [the videos] will mean nothing to us. We prefer closed captions over an interpreter in the corner because we can see the captions and the video at the same time. Think [of it like] the video [having] no sound, and how do you understand the video? That is what deaf people can hear,” Meyer said.

Meyer also attributes her success in the classroom to advocating and asking for help from teachers and case managers when needed. Additionally, she is involved in several extracurricular and after-school activities, including the ASL club and LSPN.

“The reason I joined the ASL club is to be able to have a place other than the DHH room to be able to communicate with my hearing peers. This [reason] also inspired me to join LSPN,” Meyer said. “It started with me taking a broadcasting class last school year. I remember when [theatre teacher Amy] Gosset talked about LSPN, I instantly wanted to do it and I knew that was my passion.”

Meyer was the Vice President of the ASL club during her freshman year and became the first DHH student to be elected for a leadership position in ASL Club.

“I feel like that [a DHH student leading the ASL club] is how it should be because the club is about American Sign Language and deaf culture and that is the deaf person’s native language,” Meyer said. “As the leader I talk to the group and see what their idea and vision for this club is and then take that into consideration. Then I look at what everyone’s ASL level is and do a lot of fun activities. But the most important key to success is to make sure everyone is involved, learning, asking and making friends in this club.”

As the Vice President, Meyer’s goal was to make the ASL club a safe place for DHH students to be able to communicate with their hearing peers. But this is not the only club that Meyer is a part of.

“With LSPN I want to be able to show that [being able to hear or being] deaf does not matter; everyone is included and anyone can make friends and have fun with it,” Meyer said. “I am so thankful for the support from the DHH program with the two clubs I am involved with. The interpreters and DHH teachers love that I am the leader of a club.”

To further explore her passion and skills, and to expand her community, Meyer also participated in several sports growing up and continues to do so today. Her first sport was dance, followed by gymnastics for ten years and cheerleading for five years. Currently, she is involved in archery and rock climbing.

“I started shooting arrows in sixth grade at West Middle. I now do rock climbing and archery through the Disabled Athlete Sports Association (DASA) where I can play and have fun with other players like me,” Meyer said.

After graduation, Meyer is planning on attending Gallaudet University or Rochester Institute of Technology to get a

degree in broadcasting or science. Gallaudet is the only university in the world where students live and learn using ASL and English.

“For my future, I am hopeful that people are more open to communication and willing to hire people with hearing impairments at work,” Meyer said. “I feel the school experience I am going through is going to help me be able to go to college better because I know the workload of homework, how to adjust to new changes, ways to communicate with hearing peers and find a strong place both in class and activities outside of [the] classroom.”

Rajeshwar Jaladi

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Debra Klevens

Category: Journalism

Students ride the highs and lows of the stock market during the pandemic

Students ride the highs and lows of the stock market during the pandemic

Hustling in and out of zoom calls, students are getting involved in the stock market. As the economy takes a downturn and local businesses begin hiring freezes, students like junior Kayvon Rezaei have turned to the stock market to make money and gain economic knowledge.

While not taught in schools, the stock market allows investors to buy and sell the stocks of companies in an attempt to earn a profit. The stock market unifies buyers and sellers to trade and purchase parts of publicly owned companies.

“If your stock goes up, especially when you make a really big-brain type of prediction, it’s exciting. Even though there’s failure, the room for excitement and success is just so high,” junior Manoah Inje said.

Students have made real profits through trading stocks in the market. Junior Kayvon Rezaei is a short-term trader, meaning he buys and sells stocks of a company within a range of days or weeks. He has made about \$200 overall from the stock market.

“The overall value of my portfolio fluctuates a lot since I’m a short-term trader, but it’s exciting when you make a smart decision and make money off of it,” Rezaei said.

For these students, the first investment didn’t always come from their bank accounts but from their families.

“My first investment came from my dad a few years ago, but it was very small and I kind of just let it go. But I seriously started investing around midsummer when my dad and I put in a huge sum of cash and started investing in a lot of companies,” Rezaei said.

Despite being self-taught investors, their advice for other budding Warren Buffets is to leverage the numerous online resources, which are available for free on YouTube and via the Stock Market Game.

“I feel like there are so many different resources from people who legitimately want to give good information to help others make smart decisions. I also feel like different investing platforms, especially Robinhood, make it easy to get into this area [easy to set up an account online and start trading right away without any commission involved], which used to be so closed off to normal people,” Rezaei said.

Even though investing in the stock market has its ups and downs, Rezaei has found that their decision-making skills have been strengthened after participating in the stock market.

“I remember there was this one gambling company that I invested in. I saw it on Tik Tok so I bought it for 50 cents per share and sold it for 47 cents. That was a bad decision because I missed out on money, but it helped me with my decision making and it set me up for the future trade,” Rezaei said.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed both challenges and opportunities to young traders. For Inje, the pandemic was an opportunity to start trading.

“The pandemic caused several stocks to plummet, which is a great time to invest. So I started to invest in the stock market after the pandemic with the intention to sell my stocks once the pandemic is done and the economy picks up,” Inje said.

The volatility of the stock market during the pandemic increases the risk involved in investing. The stock market is about making predictions and taking a risk that your prediction may be wrong, which Inje says he had the opportunity to learn and manage during the pandemic.

“You have to expect that you lose all of your money and that is the biggest risk. So you don’t want to put your life savings in the stock market. When I started investing with my dad, our goal was not as much to make money but to learn, and losing all of our money was a part of that. However, there is a sense of dread when you see the stock price fall, and you put in a ton of money in it,” Inje said.

On the other hand, Rezaei, who started trading prior to the pandemic, faced huge swings in the prices of many stocks he invested in.

“In February, I invested in some cruise lines, which fell sharply soon after the onset of the pandemic. I invested in GE and the prices rose a couple of days after I made the buy because they were starting to make a vaccine for the coronavirus. The pandemic has taught me to look at those connections between the real world and the stock market,” Rezaei said.

With such a high risk in every decision made, Inje celebrates after making a profit.

“I celebrate after making money most of the time, but the big celebration has to wait till I cash out the trade and withdraw the cash. When you’re investing in something you’ve done plenty of research and [the stocks] go up 100%. It does happen and it’s always a good feeling,” Inje said.

Through trading in the stock market, Inje and Rezvai have developed new skills to apply both in and out of the stock market.

“I’ve been able to apply patience to my life as well, that’s definitely applicable and the stock market made me more aware of how businesses work and how they operate,” Inje said.

Through a combination of learning and earning, students in the stock market have developed real-world skills while building their portfolios for future endeavors.

“It’s very satisfying when you research and make relations between real life and stocks and you see your predictions come true. I make predictions by following current events with an eye and a perspective for how different events would potentially impact the economy. Making predictions and betting on the news is a matter of perspective. It is satisfying because who doesn’t like winning bets,” Rezaei said.

Brian Kang

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Lakewood Middle School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Kate Pepper

Category: Short Story

A Bright Smile

A great beast lives in the mountains above my kingdom. A scourge on our existence. Every Monday, to satiate its enormously greedy appetite, 100 people must be sacrificed. It has been this way for 294 years. Approximately 1.5 million people have died thus far. It has enormously stunted our advancement, technologically and as a civilization. Or so it says in the Great Book of History. Today is Sunday. The Sorting Day. The first fifty people chosen are young boys and girls, curiously, all under the age of 10. The next fifty are the worst criminals of all. The criminals are the ones who have broken our five laws.

1. Thou shalt not steal.
2. Thou shalt not hurt others.
3. Thou shalt not question the lord or the beast.
4. Thou shalt not look upon the king or the beast.
5. Thou shalt offer your body to the beast.

If we do not follow these rules, we will be chosen for the beast. There is a wagon route up to the mountain where the beast lives. The King says that they die a blissful death, serving their people. Few people in the country have seen the king. He has only made one public appearance, 37 years ago at his coronation. The King was simply divine at his coronation. Flashing his bright white smile, smiling at everyone. However, no one has seen him since. I am the first person in 37 years to witness the king. I was simply herding my sheep when I coincidentally saw him. I heard a squeelching sound. As I went to investigate, I saw him. But what graced my eyes was not a handsome, tall man with a radiant smile. It was a fat, old, repulsive man with squinted, hateful eyes, and a bright, white smile.

I know it was the king, for he wore the famous golden crown and the crimson cape. In his hand, he had the famous Lion Scepter, pure gold, and a meter in length. He smiled down at something.

The last thing I saw as I ran away was a bright, white smile curving on his face. As I said before, today is Sunday, the Sorting Day. All children under the age of ten gather on the stone platform to be Sorted by the king's guard. They are Sorted by weight, muscularity, looks, and intelligence. After the 50 best children are Sorted, the worst criminals appear, those who refused to be sorted, murderers, thieves, dissenters. This week there are only 37. This leaves 13 spots for randomly selected people.

Suddenly the crowd goes quiet. Then cries of reverence, and fanatical cries of joy rise from the crowd. Horses hooves trample the earth, making a thunderous sound. The king has come. Fanatics throw themselves onto the horses hooves, and get mashed to death, just for a glimpse at the king. From a golden parade of chariots, palanquins, and musicians, the king steps out of a humongous blood-red chariot. He is tall, handsome, and does not appear to have aged a day since the coronation ceremony. He steps onto the stone platform and motions for his servants to bring out something. They bring it, a humongous platform that requires ten men to move. He steps onto it, and flashes his huge, bright white smile.

“My people! I have returned from my... journey. There is something here that requires my attention. I have decided to handpick the last lucky 13 people.”

“You”, He points to an elderly woman.

“You”, He points to a farmer, who I live close by.

“You”, He points to an adolescent, no older than 15.

The king's guard seizes everyone who he points to. Nine more people go, not even protesting. Instead, they

seem ecstatic that the king has chosen them to die. There is only one spot left. The king looks through the crowd, and then locks eyes with me.

“You”, he says, his mouth curled into a bright, white smile.

. * * *

The king’s guard drag me into a wagon, with nine others. 10 wagons in total. We ride silently. The blackness of night dims our only source of light, a torch at the head of our convoy. We come to a stop, in front of a huge metal door. Carved on it are depictions of our First King, the beast, and the first 100 sacrifices. At exactly midnight, we enter through the doorway, into a cave. It is not massive, as I thought it would be. What is the beast? A dragon? A great monster from mythology?

I am at the end of the line. The first sacrifice is a small boy, less than half my height, with big brown eyes and a curious smile. He walks into the darkness of the cave. I hear blood spatter. The second is a girl, who has long blonde hair, and a heart-shaped face. The next 40 minutes go by in a daze. Finally, it is down to the final ten. I am close enough now to see a bit of the beast’s arm. It stretches from the dark and motions for a woman with chestnut hair to come closer. She does, and it grabs her. With its hands. It has hands.

The same thing happens until I am the only one left. The hand motions me forward. I shake my head. It seems pleased. I hear a laugh. Something leans forward from the darkness. I am shaking now, hyperventilating, sweating. I urinate in my pants. A face leers out at me. The beast has a face. A face with a bright, white smile.

Georgia Kerrigan

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Jarrod Roark

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Extra Ordinary

On the way to school on an average morning in 2015, I practically held my breath in the backseat of my mom's red minivan, completely captivated by the story of a man who sailed the English Channel in a bathtub. I found myself engrossed in this story, and so many others, each time my mom's car defaulted to Kansas City's public radio station. If I was lucky, the radio station would be playing an episode of *The Moth Radio Hour* or *This American Life* -- my favorite storytelling radio shows. On the way to the grocery store, I'd find myself enthralled with the tale of two brothers running from ghosts in a graveyard or a woman who was a secret agent in World War II. On the way to gymnastics practice, I'd tune in to the story of a Japanese man on a gameshow who had to survive off of sweepstakes. Interesting people and their interesting stories were ingrained in the otherwise mundane ritual of car rides with my mom.

As the story would inevitably come to a close or be cut off upon the end of our car ride (I was always annoyed when the latter occurred before I could hear how it ended), I consistently concluded on the same thought: "I want to be interesting enough to tell a good story like this."

With that desire constantly on my mind, I found myself yearning to be more than ordinary throughout my childhood. When I did summer dive, I was adamant that I would be an Olympic diver. When I won a local writing competition at age nine for a picture book that was mediocre at best, I nevertheless dreamed up a future of being a Caldecott Medal author. While these might sound like typical, overly-zealous childhood delusions, to me, they were a necessary part of being as special as the storytellers I admired on the radio. To my childhood self, having a story worth telling was a matter of being a person worth listening to. In making the mundane parts of myself as compelling as possible, I was desperate to ensure I was more than *just me*.

Every determined attempt to be an extra special version of whatever I was enamored with at the time always disappointingly ended in me still being me: a one-hit writing wonder, a casual athlete instead of a gold medal marvel, and a girl who merely took baths in her bathtub rather than sail it across the English Channel.

In June, I upgraded from the crackled audio coming through the backseat speakers of my mom's minivan to a seat among fellow interesting-people-admirers at a live *Moth* show. Sitting yards away from the stage, I was vigilantly watchful of the barely visible backstage wings where I hoped to catch an early glimpse of one of the night's stars. To my surprise, when the first storyteller was introduced, he merely stood up from his unremarkable theater seat just five rows ahead and three columns to the left of me and walked up to the stage. In that moment, the abyss I always imagined separating *me* from *the radio stars* vanished, and I realized there was nothing so remarkable that made me any less of a storyteller than he.

Despite my failed attempts to be extraordinary, one thing is clear to me now that I couldn't see as a child: one only has to be a good storyteller to tell a good story. The radio show stars I was so in awe of didn't need to be record-breaking bathtub buccaneers or witnesses of the supernatural to captivate their audience. Rather, I can only assume that many of the storytellers who amazed the little girl in the backseat of the car considered themselves just as ordinary as she thought herself to be -- and they told amazing stories nonetheless.

Reece King

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

How I Got Here

How I Got Here

Do you ever think about how you got here? I mean, there are all kinds of things you can consider. Usually, we consider our parents meeting, and the scientific chances of you being born, but what about physical interactions? Like, physical events in our lives that lead up to the scientific portions of our existence? When I look at how I got here, I think about my grandpa coming to this country. Part of why is that I am fascinated by his history, and a prominent event of communism caused him to come here. It's crazy, but a world leader would have prevented my existence if he would have played his cards right. However, he didn't, creating an opportunity for my grandpa to make a change. It's an interesting thought. I sometimes consider myself born out of blood, because of the pure evil derived from this act. What do you think? Was I created by one of the biggest revolutions of the 20th century, or was it just straight luck?

It was the late 1930's, and the economy in Lebanon was very poor. It couldn't prove to be a home for my grandpa's family, so they decided to immigrate to Cuba. At the time, my grandpa hadn't been born, but his three siblings were. They traveled by boat, and the trip lasted about three months. They had to travel all the way around the continent of Africa, so it took much longer than it would have today. They eventually landed in Guantanamo, Cuba, and had my grandpa. He was born on October 28th, 1939. His family owned a small dairy farm outside of the main city. His dad was the milkman, so he would deliver fresh milk to thousands every morning. My grandpa went to Catholic school along with all of his siblings. He rode a bike with his friend to school every day. On one occasion, they nearly got hit by a motorcycle on one occasion. That event alone could have prevented my existence. He eventually graduated and went to Spain to get his medical degree. After finally finishing his education, he returned to Cuba for a couple of years. Soon after that, though, disaster struck.

In 1959, the Democracy of the Republic of Cuba was overthrown and turned into a communist nation. The ringleader, Fidel Castro, marched thousands of men into the streets of Cuba, wreaking havoc across the country. Many were left penniless, and some were even killed. My great-uncle said he saw firing squads, and so many helpless people being slaughtered for no reason. The way my grandpa described it was that the soldiers would come to your home and demand you turn over everything you have. If you refuse, you die. If you fight, you die. If you insult or anger them, you die. If you try to run, they will hunt you down, and guess what happens next? You die. There was just no way to avoid it. The soldiers came to the farm and took almost everything he and his family-owned. It was evil. Pure cruelty. The fact that someone could even have the morals or heart to do such hateful things to people that had done nothing wrong. The reason I like to talk about this is that nobody knows. Nobody understands the pain that so many people went through, and nobody even knows the name, Castro. Everyone just knows about Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, Genghis Khan, and all the other big-name dictators. When you take it into consideration, Castro was just as bad.

After his family was stolen from him, my grandpa was left with one shirt, and two pairs of pants. That's it. There was nothing left in that country for his family. There was really no way to leave either. They had no money. All hope was lost. Except, there was a catch. His sister was married to an American naval officer operating out of the Guantanamo base. He was able to get his wife and family out of the country, and bit by bit, all members of the family managed to flee to the United States. I never got to meet him, but I always hold him dear to my heart. My grandpa moved around with his sister and eventually went to Larned State Medical Hospital in Kansas. There he met my grandma and had my mom, who one day had me.

So that brings us back to the question, how much actually had to happen for us to come into existence? There are many more events, back and back and back, and I could make this essay thousands of pages long, but this one was personal. It was special. It signified love, care, and rising out of the ashes. I want whoever reads this to know that if

all seems lost if all hope has come and gone, there is always a spark. Always a tiny flicker of possibility. If you embrace that flicker, that little snippet of opportunity, you can always find a way out. You can reach the end of the tunnel. You can make a change. That's what my grandpa did. From the moment he landed on American soil, right up until this breath. At the time of this writing, he is 82, but by the time this is read, he will probably be 83. He is currently still operating as a Psychiatrist out of Lawrence, Kansas, and he is happy. He made the change, and so can you.

Benjamin Kruger

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Elizabeth Reed

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Choosing Hope

Choosing Hope

I rummaged through my bag to find my *tallis*. The dark blue cloth caught my eye, and I eagerly grabbed it. As I draped the sacred cloth across my shoulders, I stopped for a moment and recalled using that same movement three years ago. I remember standing on the *bimah* of my synagogue, anxiously holding my *tallis* in anticipation of my *Bar Mitzvah*. Amidst my nerves, I found comfort in the precious fabric. Now I stood in the Old City of Jerusalem, in front of the Wailing Wall -- the most sacred spot for Jews on the planet. And I knew with absolute conviction that the admiration and respect that I held for my *tallis* on the day of my *Bar Mitzvah* had not changed.

An elderly man stood by the wall with his hand held out in invitation. He was draped in a white robe with the Star of David printed across his chest -- the marking of a Rabbi. He asked if I wanted him to wrap my *tefillin*. I knew nothing about him; he looked a little different and spoke with a thick accent. But for some inexplicable reason, I looked him in the eye and said, "Yes, of course, thank you sir."

He said to me with a smile, "Don't call me sir. Call me brother."

Proudly, I strolled up to the wall, bent my knees, and rested my head on the ivy-covered rock. Despite the blistering hot day, the aged stone was startlingly cold, and I reflexively winced. But when I closed my eyes to sing the *Shemah*, I could feel all the whims of the world fade away. A thousand voices among mine, and I could hear each one. Some trembling with power, others shaking with passion: all resonating in reverence. Instruments expressing the soul of the individual, singing the same song of prayer, and harmonizing in the most poetic way. And then me, standing before the strongest faith that I have ever known -- clinging with the entirety of my being to a moment. And when I finally let that moment go, I knew the meaning of *Hashitiyya* -- the kissing of the Heavens and the Earth. The synthesis of faith and knowledge. The blend of spirituality and reality. I opened my eyes with the certainty that my being would be changed forever. Not with religious enlightenment nor intellectual epiphany, but rather with the memory of that moment that makes all things uncertain certain, and all things hopeful real.

I was born a Jew, but that's not why I'm Jewish. To be Jewish means to choose Judaism every day. Doing so comes with an unfortunate understanding -- the danger of a Jewish identity. At every moment of its existence: every joyous dance, every thoughtful prayer, and every song of worship, the endless threat of anti-semitism lurks nearby. But to be Jewish also means to be a part of a *Kehilah*, a community. It means waking up every day with a blessing, grateful for another opportunity to put good into the world. It means living each day with the intent to honor the ignored, advocate for the quiet, and fight for the oppressed. And it means searching for meaning in the world -- the belief that there is something greater in the universe that gives human actions value and imbues life with purpose.

The Jewish people are, as the Rabbi told me, a family. We are a people held together by hope. Hope that the Jew will resist the allure of evil and wrongdoing. Hope that the Jew will live to uphold the tenets of his/her/their faith -- treating every human with dignity and respect. Hope that the day will come when the Jew no longer fears the destruction of their physical body by the external hatred of their spiritual identity. And hope that when the world screams out in hatred, the Jew will proclaim with equal volume the harrowing, beautiful words:

"I am Jewish."

Arielle Li

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Amanda Fleetwood

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Bonded

Tears trickle down my face, and I watch helplessly as my father sobs in anguish. He cries out for his mother sorrowfully, clutching his phone as if it is his lifeline. His older sister grieves from the other side of the screen, and the two share a moment in which it feels like I am intruding. It feels inappropriate to see my father – a stern and prideful man – reduced to a fetal position on the ground. My tears drip down and spot the carpet, and I cast my attention to the blooming circles, grateful for a reason to look away. For the first time, I watch my father cry passionately and vulnerably, and my heart aches. I weep not for the loss of my grandmother but for my father, as if my tears shoulder his pain. My siblings and I kowtow over and over as my father cries out to his mother that he hopes he made her proud. I feel heartbroken for my father as I imagine how it must have felt to move away from his parents – who gave their all to make a better life for him – only to receive the news of their death over a screen. Guilt overwhelms me as I realize I am not crying because I feel devastated, but that I am crying because my father is. It feels impure to be unbothered by my grandmother’s death. A wave of regret crashes over me – we interacted so little, but it’s too late to change things. My siblings and I slowly retreat from the room to leave the trembling form of my father in solitude.

When my grandfather passed away, we watched the funeral through a video call. It seemed pitiful to be hunched in a semicircle over a phone placed on a music stand. Layer after layer was set down in the rich mahogany coffin: fake money, ribbons, patterned diamond cutouts, and colorful sheets of paper. I watched the pixelated image of my grandfather’s face, feeling the same pang of regret as I did for my grandmother for never knowing them. My father heaved dry, racking sobs beside me, and my tears flowed faster. Mucus gathered in my nostrils, and I sniffed over and over, crying for the loss of something I never had. Through the screen, I saw familiar faces of my relatives gathered together to mourn. At that moment, my memories flooded me.

My most vivid recollections of China are filled with fond memories and blissful experiences. The smell of smoke and frying foods wafts through the air, and at night the streets are a disorienting mess of flashing billboards and street lights. Beggars rattle their cups on nearly every corner, hoping for a spare quarter or two, and cartoony murals cover the walls that line the streets.

I remember eating at the most delicious noodle place late at night; my small body would manage to consume the entire serving. The noodles and meat slices were generously piled in the bowl, and the hot beef broth would be so savory that I would somehow manage to eat more.

I remember having dinner with my mom’s side of the family in front of the TV, watching 大头儿子和小头爸爸 (a cartoon show). We would laugh together over a shared understanding of animated characters performing simple tasks. I would eat straight from the bowl of 番茄炒鸡蛋 – my favorite dish – although it was intended for my family to share.

I remember my aunts buying me gold earrings and my grandfather joyfully gifting his grandchildren red packets of money. I would stare in awe at the sparkling clover earrings, and my mother would quickly confiscate the hongbao to “safekeep.” Years later, when we asked for the money back, it was long gone.

I remember looking into the faces of my relatives and seeing the smile in their eyes despite our lack of a relationship. Although we were essentially foreigners, we had a blood bond, and that was all that mattered. I loved feeling my culture encase me; it felt like my life in an alternate dimension. Being with my relatives was all I cared about, rather than sightseeing at magnificent sites.

I would play Candy Crush on my aunt’s phone and frolic with my cousins. We would buy trinkets from malls and play games at the arcade. We would go tubing and explore the city together. Despite being unable to communicate about more profound matters (my Chinese is not fluent), we loved each other.

Even though I spent only a month in China every two years, it felt like a second home. Near the end of our visit, our giant family tree would gather to eat at a fancy Chinese restaurant. The adults would order course after

course, and waiters would set aromatic dishes on the Lazy Susan turntable. Those gatherings were the peak of my vacations, and my parents would be the happiest they would be for the rest of the year. I would be stuffed by the time the third dish arrived, and chopsticks would stretch out and refill my plate before I could blink. A red glow would light up on the adults' faces that appeared after one too many drinks of alcohol. The joyful chatter in Shanghainese was endless, filling my ears with dopamine and a heavy sense of nostalgia when I went home.

When I imagine it, I can feel the emotions my parents must have felt – to see the people who raised you and the siblings who grew up with you, only to fly back to America too soon. I wonder if it would hurt more never to see them at all.

When COVID-19 emerged, China went through a lockdown, and traveling became too dangerous. China underwent strict quarantine and denied visitors. My family could not visit our relatives for an extended period. It was only then that I realized how much seeing my distant family meant to me. All of a sudden, a staple of my life was missing. I have not been to China for several years now, and I miss everything. I miss the bustling atmosphere of China. I miss being welcomed into my aunt's modest flat with open arms. I miss the smell of 菜饭 (rice cooked with vegetables and meat) that would greet my nose like an old friend. I miss walking around the city of Shanghai. I miss my family.

Every so often after the death of my father's parents, there were moments spent in somber recollection. I could feel my father's remorse for being unable to visit one last time before they passed away, sadness for not attending their funerals in person, and loneliness for being the only one to endure such pain. Before their deaths, my father would fly into an enraged frenzy, shouting that he just wanted to go home, to go to China, to see his parents again, leaving the rest of us in a choking silence. After their deaths, his presence was muted. He seemed to be hollow for some time. On car rides from my dance studio to home, he would lightly bring them up in conversation, but I would catch a glimpse of glistening tears on his cheeks and give him privacy by pretending not to notice. I cannot truly understand the depth of his loss.

I wonder if my father regrets any past arguments or if he regrets how often they showed each other gestures of affection. I wonder if he wishes he had told them "I love you" one more time or if he wishes to change the last words he spoke to them.

Whenever my parents and I have disagreements, I wonder how I would feel if those were the last words we ever exchanged. I wonder if I will look back on our altercations, wishing I spent more time laughing than arguing with them. I imagine feeling the same emotions that my father felt when he lost his parents. From empathizing with my father's experiences and learning from my own, I have learned that showing forgiveness and love is a way to avoid regretting past decisions and losing connections. It is hard to realize the value of things until they are gone, and through the memories I have gathered in China, I understand the preciousness of familial relationships. One can never truly leave their roots, but as time passes and distances grow, one can never truly return. As I get older, it feels like time is trickling away through my fingertips; since I still see my family every day, I will do my best to cherish the moments I have with loved ones.

Diane Li

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Celeste Prince

Category: Poetry

The Incision

Greeted with a foul stench of blood
and death, you walk into the musty classroom.

Buckets filled to the rim with gore, the color
a deep maroon, like the slaughter

of crimson cranberries. You reach with your bare hands inside,
seizing a lump of rubbery flesh

full of a mixture of chaos
consisting of a jumble of veins and arteries

until you realize that it was the heart
of an animal once alive

and now dead. Carrying the remnant, blood
splatters across the pristine floor resembling

a murder scene, until you rest it upon the table,
scalpel and metz scissors

ready in your hand. Your body stills,
limbs paralyzed, as you stare into the lifeless organ

composed of its shriveling valves
and sickening odor of an inescapable death

till your lungs let out a breath,
and the scalpel in your hand

creates the final incision.

Garrett Li

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Larry Swanson

Category: Journalism

Qatar: The Controversial Host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup

Scorching summers, regularly topping 100 degrees. An autocratic country made up of 3 million people – of which only 10% are actual citizens. Human rights concerns over the treatment of workers, women, and LGBTQ+ people. What does this all add up to? The host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In 2010, when Qatar, a country 20% smaller than the state of Connecticut, won the right to hold the future 2022 FIFA World Cup, many viewed the situation negatively. Now, even the former head of FIFA called the decision a mistake – even though the 2022 Qatar World Cup has become the most profitable world cup, the decision has remained unpopular. So, what is wrong with Qatar?

When Qatar first won selection in 2010, it lacked much of the infrastructure required to host such a massive event. Qatar was little more than a sandy desert; without the stadiums, highways, and hotels it needed, it would not be a successful host. So, it called upon its migrant workforce. These migrant workers, who comprise 90% of Qatar's population, faced dangerous working conditions. Although Qatar initially claimed that only 37 workers died working on World Cup construction sites, recent investigations revealed that over 6,500 workers had died since 2010. (Recently, Qatar has changed their original number of deaths from 37 to "between 400 and 500".) Even though Qatar points towards its 2014 Workers' Welfare Standards as a sign that worker conditions are improving, advocates say these standards are seldom enforced. Instead, workers usually sleep on the floor in unhygienic, crowded places. They live in fear of their employer, who controls their pay; thus controlling whether or not workers can support their families. The climate of Qatar only exacerbates this slew of issues.

Qatari summers are blazing. Hot and humid weather makes it deadly to play 90+ minutes of football; the World Cup was played in winter to avoid the deadly heat. However, these (rightful) accommodations for football players have covered up another underlying migrant worker issue. Laborers work daily, only taking a lunch break for a few hours to avoid the hottest part of the day. Soaring temperatures result in common bloody noses, muscle cramps, headaches, and vomiting for workers. Sadly, while working for 100+ degrees in zones where one has to pay for water is outrageous, many workers have no other choice. After all, the fear that employers will dock the little pay workers earn fuels many workers to look past their discomfort and continue working without reporting any deadly situations they face. Ultimately, this only leads to health issues extending long past workers' time in the workforce.

Even beyond the harsh treatment of migrant workers, Qatar's human rights situation is terrible. Under the guardianship system, women are tied to a male guardian – whether that be father, brother, or husband. Through this guardianship system, women must obtain permission from their male guardian to study abroad, marry, work in government, or receive forms of reproductive healthcare. Additionally, Qatar's criminal code outlaws sex outside of marriage, leading to prosecutions against rape victims. Qatar's view on LGBTQ+ people is not modern either: homosexuality holds a hefty punishment of up to seven years in prison – and a Qatari ambassador for the World Cup recently described homosexuality as "damage in the mind." At the same time, FIFA condones these actions. FIFA threatened to issue yellow cards to any player wearing 'OneLove' armbands during matches. These conservative views have led to conservative actions: security forces in Qatar are known to detain citizens simply due to their LGBTQ+ status; those detained are subject to physical and verbal abuse by security officers. Aside from being slapped, kicked, or punched, detainees' phones are (unlawfully) searched; security forces take screenshots of their messages with others and copy down the contact information of other LGBTQ+ people. On release, those wrongfully detained are left with no records of the incident; instead, they're left with trauma. These activities are not made secretive on the international stage. Grant Wahl, a journalist arriving in Qatar for the World Cup, decided to wear a rainbow t-shirt to the USA-Senegal game; he was promptly stopped by a security guard and told to change his shirt. After Grant made a hasty tweet about the situation, another security guard ripped his phone out of his hands. From there, Grant was detained for almost half an hour while guards yelled at him to take his shirt off and refused to give back his phone. In the end, he was let free – but as a whole, the entire situation showcases Qatar's determination to stamp out human rights in their nation.

With so much against Qatar, why did FIFA choose it to be the host of the FIFA World Cup? The answer is simple: money. To become a host country, the country must undergo two years of PR events to impress FIFA. At the same time, they must try to outbid other countries to gain FIFA's goodwill – such as offering to shoulder travel expenses, building more advanced stadiums, etc. From there, twenty-four of the FIFA executive committee – these include the leaders of each FIFA confederation (the six confederations split the world into six different football regions for easier management) as well as senior officials like the president of FIFA – decide on the host country. In order to win the bid, the host country needs the majority vote; in this case, countries need 13 votes to win. There are no checks and balances. Twenty-four of the top FIFA officials decide which country gets to host the FIFA World Cup and obtains the accolade of doing so. Through this flawed system, it was only inevitable that countries would begin to try and vie for personal attention from the executive committee. Germany was the first country to do so. Journalists alleged that Germany bribed at least four FIFA officials to vote for Germany as hosts of the 2006 FIFA World Cup; an internal FIFA investigation followed these allegations, culminating in a conclusion that three German FIFA officials had given in to bribery and corruption. However, the case was dropped due to time running out on it. Germany's bribery was only the beginning: allegations that South Africa had bribed officials to win the bid marred South Africa's 2010 World Cup. FIFA then admitted that its officials had been bribed with up to \$10 million for their votes. These two FIFA controversies set the stage for future World Cup bidding. When 2010 rolled around and FIFA settled on Russia and Qatar as the respective future 2018 and 2022 World Cup hosts, accusations of bribery started to surface once more. The US Department of Justice charged five FIFA Executive Committee members of, among other things, money laundering and wire fraud. Jack Warner, vice president of FIFA at the time, was allegedly paid \$5 million to vote for Russia and \$2 million to vote for Qatar. Russia also promised \$1 million to Rafael Salguero for his vote, while Qatar made payments to Julio Grondona, Nicolás Leoz, and Ricardo Teixeira for their votes. Simply because of Russia and Qatar's large sums of money and their ability to work under the table, FIFA awarded them the honor of being host countries to future World Cups.

What's next? With the successful completion of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and a riveting final between arguably the two greatest football players of this generation, the world is moving on. Plans have already been announced to dismantle Qatar's Stadium 974 and convert other stadiums into commercial centers. However, not all hope is lost in the fight to bust corruption from FIFA and improve human rights in Qatar. Since 2011, FIFA's Congress has taken the role of deciding the FIFA World Cup host country – the congress, being made up of 211 members from each member country, is less susceptible to corruption. And even as public scrutiny shifts towards other focuses, the fight in Qatar is far from over. Recently, Gianni Infantini, the current president of FIFA, met with an International Labor Organization delegate to discuss the creation of a Legacy Fund that will support children's education. Additionally, FIFA plans to establish a labor excellence hub that will encourage human rights practices and safer working conditions. As an outpouring of labor and LGBTQ+ stories continue flowing from Qatar, although the fight appears to be an uphill battle, perhaps one day Qatar may transform itself into a better society, one with greater freedom and celebrated diversity.

Garrett Li

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Larry Swanson

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

The Way Home

It took 0502 two hours to fall asleep every night. The glow of the others in the room only exacerbated his insomnia, and every night he would think about the outside world. 0502 wasn't educated; nobody in his colony was. All he could do was dream about what lay beyond the red sands and the frozen dunes, dreams that eased him into sleep every night. And every morning, the Foreman would wake them up and send them down into the cold mines, where all the 500s would toil away as the sweat their bodies produced froze into biting ice particles. Lunch was a short break, during which they would consume a bland, slushy sort of soup. From there, they would return to the mines as a Cargo-Returner lifted their hard work away. Only the Foreman knew where it went, and on occasion, the Foreman would leave with the Cargo-Returner and a new Foreman would return. Each Foreman that 0502 had seen had the same plasticky gaze and insincere smile that screamed their authority.

Every single day, 0502 yearned for something different. But it was always the same -- the piercing cold of Mars that dulled the muscles, the repetitive blasting motion that left his arms trembling and back aching. But nothing ever changed.

A 2nd Snowden? Leaked documents describe the Martian colonies

Capital riots turn deadly as stubborn liberals push for reformation

"THEY ARE PEOPLE TOO": Protestors cry out for change

"Damn." The President slammed his fist onto his mahogany desk. "Every single news article is out for blood. Who the -- who thought it a good idea --" the President sighed. It had only been six years since he had been sworn into office, and those six years had already been marred with controversy. There was always some do-gooder banging on about worldly affairs; he had only just stamped out the arguments that climate change was real, and now he had to deal with the "human rights issue on Mars". His entire PR team was working overtime. The President popped a chocolate into his mouth; his face soured as he tasted the tangy butyric acid on his tongue. He would have to order more of that Belgian chocolate. Or perhaps he could pass a law outlawing the use of butyric acid in American chocolate -- he would have to get the FDA involved. His thoughts on the standardization of the chocolate creation process were interrupted by someone knocking on the door.

"Come in."

A scraggly unkempt young man walked wordlessly over to the President and handed him an official-looking sheaf of papers.

"What's this?" The President asked.

"Oh, sir, this is the investigation you ordered into the Martian Mining Program."

"I don't recall ordering an investigation within our own premises." The President pushed the documents back.

"Uhhmmm, sir, you did, around a month ago." The man smiled feebly.

The President grunted. "I'll look at them. What's your name again?"

"Oh, I'm Weatherby, sir."

"Well, Weatherby, I'll have a little chat with -- ah, James Grunk, was it? The secretary of Health and Human Services? About your continued employment."

Weatherby flushed. "Actually, sir, I'm part of the Department of Space Exploration --"

"--get out of my office, err... Weathers." The President slammed his hand onto the investigation file. Weatherby slunk out of the office, head lowered. Once the President heard the door click shut, he sighed and tossed the bundle of papers onto his messy desk. He would look at it all sometime later. The President settled into his chair and lit a cigarette.

0502 was soaring over great golden glaciers and swaths of purple tundra. Tiny blue rocks speckled the ground.

0502 swooped lower for a closer look; the beauty was breathtaking – a great light shone down across the land while clusters of color seemed to bloom and glisten before his eyes. However, the land rapidly started fading into gray; the clumps of color shriveling away. 0502 began plummeting toward the earth; CRUNCH – 0502’s eyes snapped open. A tear ran down his cheek. He had been crying, but why? He recalled some sort of beautiful dream...

“The time is 5:00.” The Foreman blared.

0502 sat up, rubbed his eyes, and picked up his standard-grade mining contraption. The metal was freezing to the touch as it always was; 0502’s hands cemented to it and he had to pry his hands off, tearing off some skin in the process. For the first time, 0502 cursed the weather of his planet.

The President cursed the faulty air conditioning of the room. It was sweltering; the flashes of the cameras blinded him; a bead of sweat rolled down his temple. He hated being transparent to the people.

“I am pleased to announce that we are beginning the reintegration process of the Martian Mining Program and the closure of our genetic experimentation facilities.” The President looked back down at his index cards which had become smudged by his sweaty hand. He shuffled them around. “As you know, many years ago, President 91 announced the beginning of a historic step in genetic engineering. Lab-created infants underwent genetic processing and it was discovered that we could create a new strain of humanity. However, errors in genetic code were created and it was -- at the time -- impossible to place these genetic superhumans back into society. These genetic superhumans -- or genetic mistakes--”

Someone coughed. The President wiped his forehead.

“These -- beings -- were found to have resistance to extreme temperatures and strength untold. However, an error in the Acqui-6 genome made them, for lack of a better term, glow. Additionally, our scientists discovered that the things matured at a slower rate. Our fledgeling space colonization program decided to use these things- beings- as their explorers. This slowly formed into the Martian Mining Program, where the genos were utilized in mining rare minerals on Mars.

“From there, the United States of America underwent prosperous growth in the economy and in technological sectors. We have doubled the size of our military and taken complete dominance of the world economy. Our technological developments surpass every single country in the world. Our space program has been the most effective space program since the days of NASA. The United States of America holds the world’s largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. The United States of America controls world peace.”

The President looked back at his note cards. Pause for clapping. There was none. He cleared his throat and began again.

“However, it has come to the government’s attention that the continuation of this program is, at best, unsustainable, and at worst, a crisis. This is why, after a span of over a century, we are ending the Martian Mining Program as well as our forays into genetic engineering.”

The President set down his cards. He was immediately bombarded with questions.

“Sir, wasn’t it publicly announced that genetic engineering was ended a long time ago?”

“To the public, yes. Next question?”

“Sir, why do you hesitate to call the people *the people*?”

“The beings? People are beings. By calling them beings, I offend nobody.”

“Sir, doesn’t that exacerbate the difference between genos (genetically modified) and the non-genos (not genetically modified)?”

The President ignored the question. “Next.”

“Sir, how will the process of bringing the beings back work?”

“That is classified at this time. Do not fear, however, change is on the horizon.”

Cameras clicked and reporters continued to clamor for attention as the President left the press conference.

0502 could feel the palpable tension in the room. For the first time, the Foreman had called them in to lunch earlier than usual. The Foreman opened his mouth to speak.

“0500: You shall go by Jaime.”

0500 blinked as the nametag implanted in his chest buzzed.

“0501: You shall go by Karissa.

“0502: You shall go by Gavin.

...”

Slowly, everyone in the 500 Colony was given names. Finally, the Foreman opened his mouth once more.

“These are the names you shall go by. Please meet in the meeting tent for a showing of a video that will detail your future.” The Foreman glided away.

Many decades ago, a group of brave people volunteered to venture out into the unknown. You are their

offspring. It is time for you to return back home to Earth.

The video cut from pictures of green plains and blue skies to rainy rainforest scenes. The smooth narration continued.

The benevolent President 101 has authorized the beginning of a new process. A new life on Earth

Earth. The word sounded smooth and refreshing. Gavin quickly glanced around the room; everyone else's eyes were focused on the sharp images of green. He refocused his attention back to the screen, unwilling to miss any more precious seconds of imagery (which were now depicting deep dark navy depths).

However, to keep the process as even as possible, your education will take place here on Mars. Every two hundred sols, a lucky two of you shall return home. Slowly, over the course of many years, all of you on Mars shall experience life on Earth. Thank you, and we hope you've enjoyed your once-in-a-lifetime duty on Mars.

A smile blossomed on Gavin's face.

President calls Martian Mining Program victims "mistakes"

End of Martian Mining Program ends US world dominance

Idaho man: I do not want to live in a society with glowing geno brutes -- outcry over reintegration

Scientists: global warming still exists, contrary to the President's claims

At least the pictures of him were good, the President thought. In fact, everything seemed to be good. His approval rating had skyrocketed since the press conference. Even his PR team had congratulated him for the first time. However, he still wished he could eat his words. Of course, everything was essential, but he had (forced someone else to) run the numbers, and it was revealed that even this purposefully lengthy, slow process of reintegration would lead to an exponential decrease in profit. There was really no need to completely slow down work, was there? He rubbed his eyes. There was also the issue of global warming that scientists had warned about... he'd have his successor deal with it. There was no way the climate forecasts could be called into play so soon, right?

Now, every night, Gavin could dream of the blue and green world he had been given. He clung to this hope that he would be chosen; after all, he deserved it, didn't he? Every night, amid the whispers of a device called a "hipnopeedeya", Gavin would think about his future life on Earth. Would he explore the inky trenches of the oceans or traverse the lush grasslands? While Gavin toiled away in the dusky red mines, he would picture himself lying beneath towering trees and breathing in the clear, crisp air. As Gavin shoveled bland gray sludge into his mouth, his mind was on dizzying heights and captivating waterfalls. Finally 200 sols came and went and—
"0508 AND 0591 – HAKIM and CLAIRE. You have been chosen."

FOCUS ON EARTH: Why genos ultimately mean nothing

Disappointing agenda facing climate crisis

Investigation funded by fossil fuel corporation finds that global warming isn't real

Nothing ever changed, did it? The President thought. In just a month's time, he was planning on resigning from office. It had been a stressful nine years, a presidency that was on the short side but marred with more allegations and controversies than almost any other. Perhaps President 102 could deal with the earthquakes that shook the nation, hurricanes that battered the coasts, and fires that ravaged the south. However, there was still one more thing that had to be done. A move that would signal devotion toward Earth.

It had been ten years since Gavin hadn't been chosen and what little hope he'd held was on the brink of death. There had been many more opportunities, but since the very first 200 sols had gone by, Gavin's dreams had dwindled. Gavin was now able to put words to his feelings; hatred: towards the bone-chilling cold of Martian nights and oppressive heat of Martian middays, longing: towards the seemingly utopian Earth, apathy: towards his duty and life. Ten years ago, he had been given a name for the outside world he had dreamed about for so long, yet nothing else had changed. In fact, with the departure of 0522 and 0573, the (new) Foreman had kicked the rest of the colony into high gear. The remaining colonists were forced to work in overdrive. Lunch break had been cut even shorter, resulting in educational videos so sped up that they sounded like near gibberish. Every night, Gavin would try to fall asleep to the unwanted whispering in his ear, and every morning, Gavin would grab his mining contraption and blast through rock and rubble in the mines. He had been doing this work before the announcement, but now, Gavin knew that there was more to life than this. There were green pastures and blue skies, thunderous clouds and slick rainforests. Frogs that chirped and elephants that trumpeted. Birds who sang, high up in trees that seemed to penetrate the sky. But instead of enjoying Earth, Gavin was stuck on Mars, with its blinding dust storms and sand that seemed to get within every crevice. An ugly red planet that was pockmarked with ugly red craters. Where was the greenery here?

Then, the Foreman called them into a new meeting. Gavin was immediately reminded of the first announcement.

Was the 500 colony coming home? Was this it? He tried to kill his hope, but it was hard -- a phrase popped into his mind. "Hope is the thing with feathers." And so, even as Gavin tried to quell his feelings, there was a noticeable spring in his step as he took his place with the others in the meeting tent.

Hello, beings. This is your President 101 speaking. I do this with a heavy heart, and I take no pleasure in bringing this news to you. It is with great agonizing pain that I would like to tell you that we are ending the Martian reintegration program. You are not coming to Earth for the foreseeable future. We simply are unable to handle -- we simply cannot take you. Continue doing your duties out there, beings. Do your duty, make us proud, and stay strong through it all.

0502's ears were ringing. You are not coming to Earth for the foreseeable future. The Foreman left the remaining 500s in the tent. You are not coming to Earth. The entire room was still. You are not. And suddenly, a great roaring ball of hatred formed in 0502's stomach. He would kill Mars. He would kill the President. He would -- he would make a return trip to Earth.

0502 picked up his mining contraption; his colony followed suit, ready to return to the mines. 0502 felt a deep rage for these other 500s, who were too blind to see the glory of Earth, too deaf to hear its calls. He was reminded of when 0508 and 0591 had been chosen -- they had walked towards the Cargo-Returner just as these others were walking back towards the mines. Why had the ones who couldn't appreciate the beauty of Earth been blessed with a return trip? Why had Gavin been overlooked in the decision?

Gavin would make his own decision. And so, while the rest of the 500s trooped back to continue mining rock, 0502 shouldered his contraption -- weapon -- and walked straight into the Foreman's tent.

He fired the explosive.

For a moment, 0502 felt remorse that he was taking an innocent's life -- and then he couldn't feel anything at all. A blinding light filled his vision and 0502 collapsed, his skin sizzling. When he finally turned his gaze to where the Foreman used to sit, he only saw singed metal and smelt the acrid stench of burnt rubber. 0502's anger bubbled up once again. Earth was simply too cowardly to send one of her real people up to Mars -- was this how it was? Did Earth not want 0502 -- Earth didn't want one of her own creations? It didn't matter. 0502 would return to Earth.

He boarded the Cargo-Returner as he had seen countless times other foremen do. And so he was finally on the return trip, hurtling back home. Here, he could come to terms with his actions; here, he realized even if dead, 0502 would be the happiest he had ever been if he simply made his way back to Earth. Earth was where all life seemed to be, and 0502 would be glad to gaze upon the slightest bit of greenery.

The Cargo-Returner kicked off the ground, shooting up red plumes of dust. 0502 sat back and waited for impact on Earth.

CRASH. It'd seemed like an eternity, but 0502 had made it. He clambered out of the metal egg, only to be met with a hazy cloud of red dust. 0502 was suddenly reminded of a past memory... he looked at his hands, but this time, his eyes were completely dry. He heard voices and turned his head slowly toward the sound.

"Damn ozone layer falling apart -- some sorta D-Terra-Formation or whatever that newspaper was talkin' bout. We got our shipment though. Oh?"

"What?"

"Looks like we got ourselves a stowaway here, huh? I thought your kind wasn't allowed back here, hmm?"

0502 shook his head, trying to clear the haze from his mind. There was a click. 0502 looked up and saw a great metal barrel; one that contained a yawning hole that seemed to stretch endlessly into darkness. There was a clap of thunder -- and 0502 collapsed, a pool of rusty red already forming beneath his head. But it didn't matter. He had seen enough. He had only landed back on Mars.

Garrett Li

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Educator: Larry Swanson

Category: Journalism

Glickman: An Innocent Victim of the CIA

In today's world of conspiracy theories, one common theme is that the CIA is out to get someone or some group by poisoning one's food or perhaps slipping drugs into one's drink. While others may see this as a foolish fear, there is some basis in this seemingly unfounded belief. In the 1950s, the CIA led multiple experiments on the unsuspecting public built around biological weaponry and the usage of drugs. Some, like Operation Sea Spray, in which bacteria were sprayed over San Francisco by the US Navy to test how vulnerable the US was to bio-weapons, had less of a harmful intent. However, other CIA experiments would target innocent citizens in their quest searching for a mind control drug.

Stanley Glickman, born in New York in 1927, was an aspiring American artist who traveled to Paris in 1951. After arriving, he enrolled at the Académie de la Grande Chaumiere and began taking classes and studying fresco painting in Florence over the summer. He soon set up his studio in the autumn of the following year and made friends with whom he discussed ideas.

One evening in October 1952, a friend invited him over to Le Select (a famous literary café in Paris). The pair joined a group of Americans. Soon, talk turned to politics, resulting in a heated debate on power and patriotism. Finally, Glickman got up to leave.

However, one of the men insisted on buying a final drink for Glickman as a peace offering. Instead of calling the waiter, the man walked to the bar and ordered the Chartreuse himself. Although Glickman didn't know it, this would be the last few moments of his artistic life. Halfway through his drink, he began feeling strange – what he described as a “lengthening of distance and distortion of perception.” Hallucinations soon set in; his mates leaned in, fascinated. Glickman, fearing he had been poisoned, broke free and fled home.

After awakening the following day, another wave of hallucinations washed over Glickman. For the next couple of weeks, he would wander the streets of Paris in a haze. Finally, after collapsing at Le Select (where he had tried to return to the root of his nightmare), he was taken by an ambulance to the American hospital in Paris (which had a confidential relationship with the CIA). Although records state that he was given sedatives, he claimed that he was treated with electroshock and was possibly given more hallucinogenic drugs.

For the next ten months, he refused to eat for fear of poison, instead choosing to live as a recluse in his flat. Finally, his parents learned of his condition, and his brother-in-law took him home. Even under a doctor's care, he would never fully recover. He stopped reading books, avoided old friends, never held a steady job, never had another romantic relationship, and never painted again.

Although his story seems impossible, there is evidence that it occurred. In the 1950s, the CIA began multiple projects focusing on mind control. Additionally, Glickman identified one of the men as having a limp and a misshapen foot, matching Sidney Gottlieb's (the man in charge of all the projects) 's unique clubfoot. Glickman previously had hepatitis which had been treated at the American hospital before the entire incident; the CIA files revealed a 1951 article that described the greater effect of LSD on people with hepatitis. Even more facts would slip into place: in the summer of 1952, it was known that Sidney Gottlieb (head of all the mind-control experiments) had already requested experiments on unsuspecting citizens.

In the end, there was no happy ending for Stanley Glickman. Nearly thirty years after the incident, Glickman learned about the multiple projects the CIA had formed during the Cold War era. He and his family found a lawyer to sue the CIA. Sadly, the trial would be delayed for 17 years on technical grounds. Glickman's sister took up the case once Glickman died in 1992. Eventually, a federal court jury decided that Glickman's lawyers failed to prove that the CIA scientist Sidney Gottlieb had spiked his drink in October of 1952. His story would soon be left as a footnote in the CIA's deadly quest for a drug that could control minds.

Lucia Li

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shruti Upadhyay

Category: Critical Essay

Doomsday: The Problem With Predictions

“Most of the people who are going to die in the greatest cataclysm in the history of man have already been born.” Mass famine would sweep across multiple continents, followed by an unprecedented pandemic. The survivors would then kill each other like animals in the wars, causing a global catastrophe.

Those were the predictions written in Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 book *The Population Bomb*, which predicted that hundreds of millions of people would die from famine in the 1970s [Ehrlich, 1968]. Population growth would be so rapid that the earth would become unable to sustain it.

Fortunately, Ehrlich’s predictions did not even come close to fruition. However, what we view as apocalyptic fear-mongering, was taken as Gospel by the intellectuals and politicians of the era. Per Charles C. Mann of the Smithsonian Institute, *The Population Bomb* sparked a massive worldwide frenzy about overpopulation that inspired horrific programs such as India’s forced sterilization of millions in the 1970s and China’s One Child Policy [Mann, 2018].

Ehrlich wasn’t the first person to make a catastrophically incorrect prediction, and he won’t be the last. Rightists, leftists, religious zealots, intellectuals, scientists, and many others have made bold predictions about the future of the world. Time and time again, history has proven these claims wrong. Yet time and time again, society has been whipped into a fatal frenzy by such predictions.

So why exactly are people so bad at predicting the future?

Indefinitely Extrapolating a Trend

A problem with most predictions about the future is that they inaccurately assume a trend will continue indefinitely at its current rate. For example, if a prediction for the future height of a baby was based solely on how much it grew the first year, the baby would be expected to become a giant. However, human growth is not linear, and neither are most things in the real world. Yet despite this basic fact, people repeat the same mistake once the problem becomes more complicated.

The apocalyptic predictions of *The Population Bomb* would only make sense if the 1968 global birth rate of 5 births per woman had lasted for 54 years. In fact, the global birth rate has dropped precipitously since then, and sits at only 2.3 births per woman as of 2020 [The World Bank]. Ehrlich failed to account for the fact that the birth rate drops quickly once a country industrializes. A paper by Ranganathan et al. published in *Nature* explains that economic growth usually leads to women receiving more economic freedom. And with that freedom, women typically focus more on their career and less on raising children. In addition, economic growth causes urbanization, which leads to a lower birth rate as kids who once provided positive economic value by helping with farm work become economic liabilities that require parents to spend more money on housing and education [Ranganathan et al., 2015]. For example, Japan had a birth rate of nearly 4 births per woman in 1945 before a period of rapid post-war industrialization that lowered the rate to around 2 by 1965 and 1.37 in 2020 [O’Neill, 2022]. While countries in Africa experience massive population growth, others in Europe and East Asia face population declines that greatly offset this growth. Ultimately, the global population is growing at a controllable rate.

Another sinister example of trend extrapolation can be found in modern politics with the Great Replacement Theory.

First created by Renaud Camus, the Great Replacement Theory has found reach in the American Far Right and created fear over immigration. Proponents of the theory believe that Democrats are purposefully importing immigrants from non-white countries to replace the white majority so that they can have permanent electoral power. At its core, the Great Replacement Theory is fear-mongering about how America will no longer be a white majority country [Jones, 2022]. This has already caused irreparable damage as a gunman in Buffalo, who killed ten people (mostly black), cited the Great Replacement Theory in his manifesto [Jones, 2022]. Another gunman in El Paso killed 23 people (mostly Latino) expressed almost the exact sentiments in his 2019 manifesto [Romo, 2019]. As these ideas spread, there will only be more violence towards minorities and discrimination. Moreover, this backlash provides opportunities for the election of increasingly racist and xenophobic politicians with dangerous policies.

Once again, the Great Replacement theory blows things out of proportion by making the mistake of assuming that a current trend will continue indefinitely. The idea that America will become a white minority country is primarily based on the assumptions of high Latin American birth rate and immigration rates. Latin Americans have long been stereotyped as having many children, but in fact the Latin American birth rate has decreased by more than 40% over the last 15 years [Duffin, 2022], and is now just slightly higher than the white birth rate [Duffin, 2022]. An increasing number of Latin Americans are voting for Republican candidates and becoming conservatives [Simon, 2022]. The Great Replacement would be possible only if the Latin American immigration rate, birth rate, and support for Democrats all held constant at their peak for many decades. As soon as one examines the ever changing data, the theory completely falls apart. Democrats will never be handed a guaranteed electoral majority as the Latin Americans become increasingly conservative.

It is much easier to overanalyze a single trend rather than examining the complicated ways in which that trend could change over time. A failure to go deeper can cause irreparable harm from the forced sterilization programs that took away the bodily autonomy of millions to the racist conspiracy theories leading to senseless violence.

Unaccounted Variables

In addition to linear thinking, another core problem with most predictions about the future is that they assume every aspect of society will remain the same except for the one trend that the prediction is centered on.

In 1968, the global agricultural output was too low to support the billions of people that would be born in the next few decades. However, Ehrlich forgot accounting for the agricultural revolution that was happening right as he was writing *The Population Bomb*. In the decades following World War Two, advancements in GMOs, mechanized farming equipment, fertilizers, and pesticides radically improved agricultural efficiency [American Experience, 2020]. Global food production has quadrupled since 1961, while the amount of farmland used has increased by only 10% [Ritchie, 2022]. Ehrlich's predictions failed because he was too hyper-focused on the trend of population growth to consider the fact that agricultural output was growing at an even faster rate.

Another timeless example is our opposition to the adoption of new technologies. The Luddites notoriously smashed mechanized textile equipment because they feared the machines would permanently disenfranchise them, who had been trained their whole lives to be weavers. Many of the poor countries, who would benefit the most from GMOs and mechanized farm equipment, heavily resisted the adoption of such technologies due to the concerns of job loss and disruption to traditional society [Overly, 2016]. Even today, people oppose the new technologies such as self-driving cars and artificial intelligence for the same reasons.

In hindsight, opposition to changes like the Industrial Revolution or the adoption of high yield crops can seem foolish because it has shown beyond doubt that the benefits provided by such technologies far outweigh the harms. For the revolutionizing technologies such as AI, the harms seem obvious while the benefits are nebulous, yet to be proven. Benefits of Industrialization often took decades to materialize, and it will likely be the same for today's cutting-edge technologies. There's a term for this process - creative destruction. Every major new technology must destroy an existing part of society. However, in its wake, it builds up something newer and better. Just as a forest fire provides opportunities for new plants to grow after the large trees burn down, creative destruction provides an opportunity for progress and advancement once an archaic aspect of society falls.

The world is an incomprehensibly complex system that cannot be predicted based on one factor. There are countless variables, big and small, that interact with each other in tangible and intangible ways. Therefore, any prediction that treats the world as a simple system controlled by only a few aspects is doomed for failure.

Black Swan Events

Even if one managed to avoid the mistakes of linear thinking and unaccounted variables, there would still be the inevitable challenge of the Black Swan event, the highly improbable events that are very hard to predict. One can think of making a correct prediction about the future as hitting a hole in one in golf. The two mistakes outlined above can be compared to the improper technique or the wrong selection of a golf club that causes the golfer to miss wildly. Even when the golfer selects the correct club, and strikes the ball with perfect technique, there could still be highly unpredictable events like a random gust of wind or an uneven clump of grass on the green that could still sway the ball off course. Black Swan events act in much the same way and add another wrinkle into the already difficult task of predicting the future.

The story of Earth itself is full of Black Swan events. Many of the Earth's changes took place over millions or even billions of years. The predictable changes in the land masses, climate, and chemical composition of the atmosphere mandated that certain life forms would thrive while others would go extinct. However, an unpredictable event would disrupt the course of these predictable changes instantaneously. Dinosaurs once dominated the earth, living in an environment perfectly suited for their size and lifestyle. When one large asteroid struck the earth, the climate drastically changed in the blink of an eye. The dominating dinosaurs went extinct immediately while some other secondary species, like birds and mammals, inherited the earth for tens of millions of years [Osterloff].

A more recent example of an unpredictable event is the COVID pandemic. The world that seemed stable at the end of 2019 has drastically changed in only a few years. American politics, the global economy, the workplace, education, social interaction, and international relationships were all flipped on their heads in a matter of weeks. Even years after the initial outbreak, the repercussions of COVID are seen in the life of every person alive today.

Black Swan events are rare, but over a long enough time span, they are inevitable. When we make predictions that stretch far into the future or encompass a large group of people, we cannot avoid the Black Swan events that throw the entire prediction off course.

Conclusion

With all of these examples of failed predictions, one can't help but ask whether it's possible to predict the future at all. The short answer is no. The world is far too complex for people with only a limited amount of knowledge and brain power to accurately foretell. Even a seemingly insignificant event can spark a cascade of events that can change the world forever.

Buying into a black-and-white prediction about the future is the equivalent of playing a game of blackjack with blank cards. India and China bet the human rights of millions of civilians in the 1970s when they were so sure that population growth was out of control, and they lost. White supremacists bet the lives of innocent civilians when they were so sure that America was destined to be a white-minority country, and they lost.

Predictions are still a useful and interesting way to examine the world around us. But the truth is there's never a perfect prediction. The house always wins and humans are playing against the universe; the stakes are high while the chances of winning are slim to none. We still don't understand all the rules that govern the world around us. Despite recognizing all the flaws with prediction, there will always be some unaccounted trend, variable, or event that humans cannot foresee. We need to accept our limited capabilities and many fallibilities, as well as the bewildering and inconstant nature of the universe.

Roger Li

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Heather Barnhart

Category: Short Story

Warning

"Warning, this story might be too gruesome for some viewers." The news anchor paused before continuing.

"The serial kidnapper who has been terrorizing our town has struck again. It is the third attack in the past eight months. At around 9:00 pm last night, residents of 106th Street reported hearing shouting from a victim's house. When the police arrived, they found two missing children, and both parents had been stabbed. Both are in critical condition." The anchor shuddered.

"The police are reminding residents to enforce the 8:00 pm curfew and to report any tips on the kidnapper's identity or whereabouts to the police tip hotline."

A number appeared across the television screen in bold white letters.

"Now we go to Tracy, who is at the station where the police chief is holding a conference."

The TV cut to black as a woman in an oversized pink t-shirt holding a remote turned it off.

There was a look of concern on her face. She sat silently for several seconds, processing the news of the attack just a few streets away. She called out to a man in the kitchen somewhere. "There was another attack last night. I don't know." She paused. "Maybe we should leave town for a while."

"Oh c'mon," replied the man from the kitchen. "What are the chances that he'll attack us? I mean, there are hundreds of families in this town. You really think he would come after us?" He chuckled. "I see where you're coming from, but the chances are kinda slim." He appeared in the doorway, wiping his wet hands on his apron. The woman scoffed. "Don't be stupid, John. We have enough money saved up. We haven't been on vacation in two years," she said as she counted off her fingers. "It's summer, the kids are free, and we just take a well-deserved break until they catch the guy."

"Hey," the man said in a soothing voice, "There's nothing to be scared of, alright? The guy uses a knife, so we'll bring out the ol' .45. Before he touches the kids, I'll blast that creep's head off." He mimicked a finger gun.

"Like you could do that," the woman said with a laugh. "You'd get on your knees and beg for your life before our 5-year-old does."

"Oh c'mon," said the man. "I'm very macho." He puffed out his chest.

"You wish," the woman chuckled. "You were scared of that spider, remember? Yeah, very macho."

"Okay," he said as he hung his head a little bit. "You got me; I'm not macho." His head snapped back up. "But dinner's ready, so get the kids. It's lasagna night, baby!" He spun around and walked back into the kitchen.

The woman laughed as she rose from the couch. Minutes later, she walked into the kitchen with a five-year-old girl on her shoulders and a 10-year-old boy running around her ankles. They were such a happy family with beautiful kids.

"Lasagna!" shouted the little boy as they entered the kitchen. The sound of eating and conversation filled the room as they talked about their day. I crawled to the left of the kitchen window, so close to the glass my breath fogged it.

Then I stared inside, some devil on my shoulder, hoping they looked up to see me. I hated how they were so happy and perfect, especially that stupid smile hanging at the corner of the man's mouth. Their laughter made me clench my fingers around my knife so tight that I could feel the fingernails cut into my palm. The familiar sharp pain traveled my bloodstream from my hand to my brain. Only, and only the fear in these innocent little faces could free me from my gnawing pain.

"So," the man asked, "where would you kids like to go if we went on vacation?"

I laughed.

The eating stopped. Four pairs of eyes stared right back at me through the kitchen window. Then the man dropped his fork.

"Warning, this story might be too gruesome for some viewers."

Jenna Lin

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Rock Bridge Senior High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Danielle Johnson

Category: Poetry

Aubade for Henry

How, after all these years, the country swallows you slick
like shrapnel. In the belly of it you corrode, softened by rust born

an ocean away, back in the heart of another beast.
You worship this country— this country where even headless deer

learn to love the hunter's cry, this country where even you can be
a true Henry, hunger-made and ready to cock the

rifle back. Rage is a white fist the size of a swollen mouth and yours is
the swollen mouth, starving and desperate to open. I'm forgetting

that we crawled headfirst out of the heart, that
the beast births animals too. Back then the swallows

learned to fear the sound of your step, but here
the cottontails call your name: a gentle rip of

sound, rupturing the open woods. In the conifer the mouth
swallows with each cock-back, each crackling recoil. My teeth

click as magazines empty into staticky air. And then the rabbits collapsing
quietly into the dirt, terrified enough to be grateful. Like them

I am afraid, so let me become what is dead that never dies.
Let me enter this gun like a real bullet, faceless as

the new moon, let me kiss the barrel with all the
tenderness I know to give. Henry will point me,

straight and true.

Anya Liu

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lydia Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Beach Day

One spring we visited Florida, where the air stuck to my skin and clung on heavy and overcast. I couldn't breathe right through the salt-sea taste but I still tried to swallow the clammy sky, viscid stars, wanted to think of more than my mother's face when she finally understood I wasn't good enough. The way she shouted and how I could see Beijing through the fold between her eyebrows, the life she left behind in the tense of her jaw. On our last day there we took a walk down the beachfront at night and instead of moonlight all I could feel was gaping openness, the pull of the pitch-black. I want to be the tranquility of the sea. I want to be the sand, the seabirds, my mother's footsteps tracing a way home. What I am instead is a pulsing mass of grief; sentient misery. I try to make something of myself and the tide sweeps me under, churns me to seafoam, green-gray and limp with shortcoming. At night I will breathe intervals and wait for the gaping maw of the ocean to let me in. I will stare her blue-black tonsils in the eye and ask, *why couldn't I have been more?*

Emily Liu

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Short Story

Summer

I yearned for the summer, not for this year's or the next, but for summers years ago, when I was ignorant of worry and the thought of saying goodbye had never crossed my mind. It was strange how once I was a kid, sprinting through life the way lightning strikes through the sky, then suddenly, I was eighteen, living more in the past than in my own body. I supposed that there was something about graduating and leaving home that makes you reminisce upon moments buried so deep in your heart they resemble a dream more than a memory. Of those moments, I found myself gathering the ones of her— May, my closest friend since we were eight. She could command the skies with a flick of a finger and planted flowers just behind my lips. Her veins ran with star-glitter and her brown eyes encapsulated the moon. Somehow, she made me feel that this summer was one I would long for even five years from now.

For a while I had known she would be leaving. When her grandmother passed away last year, her parents had decided to return home to China, and she had applied and been accepted to university there. With a desire to support her family, she had resolved to go. For this reason, I could never ask her to reconsider, even if it was an ocean away, so I pushed my sentiments aside. Only now, when we had already left high school and summer was drawing to a close, did I realize what it meant for us.

“Where are we going?” I asked. May led me down a wooded trail just adjacent to my neighborhood, leaving the quaint rural suburbia far behind us.

“You’ll see. We’ve actually already been there together.” I glanced around, examining each tree and shrub down to the leaf for anything to stimulate my memory. It was a pity— if this was a place I could have remembered, I truly wish I had. Here it was blissfully silent, somewhere I wouldn’t mind wandering off and getting lost. Above us, clouds flooded the sky like bursts of flame erupting from the heavens; first orange, then blush pink.

Yet, even with the serene beauty of our surroundings, I couldn’t help but gaze at her. The fading sunlight had enveloped her body with a rosy hue, and while the heat felt prickly and heavy on my skin, it merely seemed to kiss her with a light peach shade. Yes, it was easy to get lost here.

Eventually, the path gave way to an empty field, an ocean of grass thinly veiled by trees on all sides. My heart gave a leap, fluttering from the warm embrace of an old memory. The golden brown waves of grass, the honeysuckle twining itself around tree trunks, the tinted sky, this feeling... I had seen it all somewhere before.

A smile emerged on her face as she noticed my wide-eyed expression. “I can’t believe you forgot!” May teased.

“Me neither,” I said, walking up to her. “How long has it been since we’ve been here?”

“I’m not sure, seven, eight years maybe? I accidentally stumbled upon this place a few days ago. Can’t believe it still looks like this.” she exclaimed with a grin.

I stepped out into the field, and sat down on a crinkly patch of grass. By now, the sun had dipped further behind the horizon, and fireflies had begun to emerge as little specks of glowing light. When I was younger, I almost believed that they were blinking stars in the night sky.

At that moment, the world seemed to stop spinning as time lost its grip over me. I found myself back there, chasing fireflies through the meadow with May at ten years old. We used to compete over who could catch more, although I never could win. Most times, the insect would fly up, just out of my reach as I jumped up, grasping desperately at the sky. May had no issue with it, cupping each bug in her hands to let me see for a few seconds before allowing it to go on its way. However, when I had finally managed to catch one after countless attempts, I held it tight, unwilling to let it go. Instead, I glanced at it in awe through my fingers. For once, I held something beautiful and precious in my hands, and wanted to keep it close. After all, who knew when I would catch another one? Eventually, my May willed

me to release it, and with much reluctance, I watched it fly away until I could no longer recognize its flashing light.

Gone was the last day I would spend there. Gone was the only firefly I had ever caught. Some say they believe in the beauty of the temporary; that sorrowful goodbyes were rare and special, but that day I learned that it was not so.

As I looked into May's eyes, I wondered if this was one of those goodbyes, if this moment would be our last together. I sat in silence, breathing her in with the understanding that once we both left for college, we might not ever grow closer than we are now. Perhaps I was too quick to assume how everything could change, but halfway across the globe was a long distance, and I think she knew it too.

Her back was to the grass, and her face to the stars when she laid down. "Tell me a secret." she said.

"You already know all of mine."

She huffed and pushed herself back up to turn towards me. "That's not true. Everyone keeps some things to themselves."

I was hesitant to respond. I struggled with being caught between saying what would have been appropriate and what I truly desired to say. I reminded myself that she was leaving for her family, and it was not my place to stand in her way.

"Well, I'm afraid." I said finally.

"Of what?"

(Of change, of someone else taking up my place in your heart, of realizing that there will come a day that we no longer speak. I am terrified that one day I will forget your face and I will become nothing more than a distant memory to you.)

"Um, of moving out, of leaving home." I admitted, nervous from all I wanted to say but couldn't.

She nodded, brushing soil off her hands. "Me too."

"It's hard to leave everything behind." I admitted as our gazes met. She looked away first, and tilted her head towards the sky.

(It's even harder to find someone else to laugh at my jokes and listen to my woes the way you do. It's hard to find another as connected as you and I.)

"Okay, your turn. Ask me anything." She declared. I hesitated, caught between possibly saying too much or too little. I bit the inside of my cheek as if it could quell my thoughts and prevent them from forming words.

"Will we still talk, when you're over there?"

May sighed. "Of course. I want to, but it's going to be difficult, with the time zones."

"I know." I sighed. "If you ever come back, I'll be here. Just let me know." Her eyes lit up, and she smiled to herself.

"Definitely."

Five Years Later

Time passes in a strange way. While we had once spoken frequently over text, as time drew on, we would only talk on birthdays or holidays. The pain has faded, but gentle memories of her still linger. I see her in the stars, hear her laughter when I crack a joke she would have enjoyed, and sometimes, when I watch the sun set, I still think of us. I wonder if she ever does the same. If I look close enough, I can see her in me too. She is present in the way I laugh, how I do my hair, my sense of humor, the playlists I make, and my love of fireflies. So much of me is made of bits and pieces of her that I can never forget. We may not know each other anymore, but this will always connect us. I no longer felt like saying goodbye, but thank you instead. For she has given me an intimate form of love I will carry with me to each summer and the next, forever.

Hansini Mahajan

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Kathryn Schaefer

Category: Dramatic Script

Spiritual Nocturne

INT. 1992 DODGE VIPER - DUSK(35mm Kodak Ektachrome film)

AISHWARYA(16), a withdrawn punk-rock violinist chases the setting sun. The Dodge's roof is popped open, and so the rushing winds kiss her hair. Her eyeliner, once Sharpie-like, smudges across her cheeks in battle markings.

Her phone rings a familiar Mariah Carey jingle. Lifting one hand from the pleather wheel, she picks up.

AISHWARYA

I know what you're thinking.

AMMA's(48) voice is scratchy, worn from years of attempting to pacify her daughter's hot-headed feelings.

AMMA

Where are you? What's going on?

AISHWARYA

I'm fine Amma. I'm just coming home.

AMMA

(Yelling)

Coming home! You're supposed to be in your dorm. Tucked in and ready for 6 AM rehearsal tomorrow.
A beat.

AISHWARYA

But they don't get me there. All those prissy musicians can't tell their instrument from their-who cares about them. I miss you.

AMMA

You're not making any sense. Tell me where you are right *now*.

AISHWARYA

(Gritting her teeth)

I'm driving.

AMMA

You're what?

AISHWARYA

(Louder)

Driving. On I-95.

Amma's deep intake scratches through the speaker.

AMMA

You don't have a license. If I remember correctly, you hardly have a permit.

AISHWARYA
It was an impulsive decision, alright?

AMMA
Where did you even get this car?

AISHWARYA
I borrowed it from a friend.

AMMA
You don't have any.

AISHWARYA
Now is not the time.

AMMA
Pull over.

AISHWARYA
But Amma...

AMMA
Just do it.

EXT. HIGHWAY - LATE NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The Dodge is parked on the side of the road, tilting into a ditch. Aishwarya has reclined the driver's seat and set her ripped-up converse on the dashboard. She holds her phone to her ear.

AMMA
You can't just give up like that. Do you know how much your father and I have worked to keep you in this school, to help you follow your passions? Don't fixate on friends, focus on the music. You can't worry about anything else.

AISHWARYA
(Crying)
I'm miserable.

AMMA
You've got to try. Come on now. Call an Uber and go back to school. And make sure that 'friend' gets their car back.

AISHWARYA
Amma, please! I don't fit in.

AMMA
Aishwarya, give that school a chance

AISHWARYA
(Her voice breaking)
Okay, love you

AMMA
Love you too. I'll see you soon. Goodbye.

Amma hangs up.

Aishwarya pushes her hair back and reaches over to shuffle through the contents of the foreign cup holder. Her index

finger grazes a cassette tape. Interested, she slips it into the car.

As she gazes at the night sky, the Eagles' Hotel California plays.

AISHWARYA
(To herself)
This isn't even real rock.

CUT TO:

INT. PRACTICE ROOM - MIDNIGHT

A curious strand of wind brushes against some crumpled, worn pages of music sitting on a piano ledge.

It escapes Aishwarya's notice as she rips a haunting melody from her violin. She plays Giuseppe Tartini's Violin Sonata in G minor, a.k.a. The Devil's Trill Sonata.

She stops mid-measure, and sets her violin in an embroidered leather case. Aishwarya releases a groan and slams the music stand onto the scuffed tiled floor. Immediately, she drops onto her knees.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
God, I hate it here. Amma just doesn't get it.
A sinuous melody bleeds into the practice room.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
Is someone there?
Aishwarya rises. She grabs her case and leans out the doorway.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
Even I know it's late...

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

The Camera PANS to the pictures of soloists whose eyes are *astily* scratched out, leaving the walls patched like paper mache.

Then PANS to Aishwarya, creeping down the barren hallway. She lingers next to each door and peaks her head in each room. But the melody continues, so Aishwarya seemingly follows.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
(Singing to herself)
There were voices down the corridor. I thought I heard them say... Welcome to Hotel California... Such a lovely place... Such a lovely face.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Clusters of equipment and bundles of wires litter the stage floor. The halo of a dark silhouette glows against the deep velvet curtains.

The strange melody crescendos as Aishwarya ambles towards the human-like shadow.

AISHWARYA
(Softly)
Excuse me?

The silhouette lurches towards her like a drunken pirate.

Aishwarya flinches.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)

You shouldn't be back here this late. You could get suspended.

The music ceases.

She faces a ghost, KUMAR. The sleeves of his blazer are missing, leaving jagged scars to showcase a misty violin grotesquely sewn onto his arm. The skin on his wrist wraps tightly around the neck of the violin. His matching pair, the delicate bow, is fused like a sixth finger. He lowers his arms, yet the instrument does not shift.

Aishwarya gasps, the blood drains from her face.

KUMAR

(Leering)

I welcome my new student with *open* arms.

He spreads his distorted limbs.

Aishwarya flinches, raising her hands protectively.

AISHWARYA

(Hysterically)

Who are you? What are you?

KUMAR

Wouldn't you like to know...

AISHWARYA

I-I-I don't think I should be here.

KUMAR

Why are you running when *you* summoned *me*?

AISHWARYA

I did NOT call-summon you!

She backs away. He steps towards her.

KUMAR

Don't get it twisted. I heeded your call. And it is up to me to uphold the rules. I believe *you* need help and I enjoy an audience.

AISHWARYA

I don't understand.

Kumar ignores her as he lifts his arms and resumes playing.

His face builds into a stony expression as his fingers dance across the violin. The bow trembles, yet the sound emitted couldn't be more clear.

Aishwarya is both entranced and disturbed. She begins to copy his peculiar execution, mimicking the perfect melody. Lost in the rhythm, she closes her eyes, and suddenly Kumar is gone. The remains of music still reverberating.

CUT TO:

INT. THEATER- DAWN

Orchestra students dressed in strait-laced college wear spill onto the stage. Like a mongrel competing with refined show dogs, Aishwarya walks towards her seat, a tattered leather jacket pulling at her shoulders. She sits behind the concert master, BETTY(19).

Betty leans toward TOMMY(20), her stand partner.

BETTY

(Eyeing Aishwarya)
I spent ALL night practicing. That Strad just ages like fine wine, y'know?

TOMMY
Well, if you take too many breaks, you know who's here to catch you on your toes.

BETTY
I wish some people understood how cut-throat this school is. They would save time not *trying* too hard.
Aishwarya rolls her eyes.

AISHWARYA
(Sarcastically)
My *STRAD* is at the shop.

Betty and Tommy ignore her.

The CONDUCTOR(35) claps her hands.

CONDUCTOR
Let's get going.

She looks down and writes a note on her score.

CONDUCTOR(CONT'D)
I would personally like to release all of you on time.

The Conductor lifts her hands.

Aishwarya raises her violin and places her bow gently on the D string. She shivers thinking of Kumar's figure.

The Conductor signals the rhythm and sweeps her hands down.

Aishwarya plays like a puppet to Kumar's strings-the melody of the score stealing her control. She performs with an increased verve, dancing with the notes. The piece finishes, and she is out of breath.

AISHWARYA
(To herself)
I've never played like *that* before...

Tuning out the Conductor, Aishwarya stares forward at the audience.

She gasps.

Kumar sits in the back of the concert hall. He waves and his fused bow slices the air.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
Oh my.

Behind him, is Amma. She looks proud and younger than Aishwarya has seen her in years.

Aishwarya's face softens.

CUT TO:

INT. THEATER LOBBY- MIDDAY - CONTINUOUS

Aishwarya exits the stage, trailing behind the stampede of musicians. She looks around for Kumar, trying to identify blue wisps in the crowd.

In the middle of the lobby, Amma stands alone with a stack of Tupperware containers.

On sight, Amma hugs Aishwarya.

AMMA

Oh, I've never seen you play like that before. You sounded wonderful. Your father wants to congratulate you too. He's pulling the car around.

AISHWARYA

Yea Ma...It just happened so fast.

Amma cradles her face.

AMMA

I was worried for a second that you let up on your school work, but now I know you're okay.

AISHWARYA

Somehow, I feel more than okay.

Amma hands her the food.

AMMA

Anyway, last night I understood that you were feeling *homesick* so I brought you *somehome* food.

AISHWARYA

(Still slightly dazed from her last performance)

Yeah thanks.

Amma turns to talk to some parents.

Aishwarya flexes her fingers trying to understand what she just did.

CUT TO:

INT. PRACTICE ROOM- DUSK

Aishwarya attempts to recreate her performance at rehearsal. Over and over she plays the opening, but she cannot continue.

She gives up and paces back and forth.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)

(To herself)

I must seek him out. Whatever we did last night worked. This is my chance to get ahead and prove to all those sorry musicians that I'm more than good, *talented*.

She looks at the clock. It's 12 A.M.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)

This was the time I started hearing-

The melody returns.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)

-the music!

Aishwarya rushes out of the room, her cherished violin and bow clutched in her palms.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE - MIDNIGHT - CONTINUOUS

This time when Aishwarya enters, Kumar shines under the stage lights. A gleeful look reflects from the black depths of his eyes. It's as if he's only living for the violin. For the music.

Aishwarya clears her throat.

AISHWARYA

So... You're a ghost.

Kumar lowers his arms and smirks.

KUMAR

I wouldn't get caught up in the semantics of it all.

AISHWARYA

But you helped me. Today, I played like I never had before.

KUMAR

And so you did.

AISHWARYA

YOU can help me beat Betty.

Aishwarya gives him a wary look.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)

I wonder, though, how did you become all-

She gestures with her hands vaguely.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)

-attached?

Kumar paces, waving his limbs around in passionate gestures.

KUMAR

You see the kids at this institution. All of their grandparents, godfathers, and ancestors have been roaming around for years. They historically don't like people like us. And when I came to this school back in the 50's. They tore me apart.

AISHWARYA

I understand. Some things just don't change.

KUMAR

Well, we can't all play for our parents. I'll settle for you.

Kumar lifts his violin. Aishwarya lifts hers. And they begin to simultaneously play The Devil's Trill.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

QUICK CUTS:

--Aishwarya walks in with her violin, Kumar waits and writes notes on sheet music.

--Kumar and Aishwarya laugh after he smacks himself in the head with his violin-bow-arm-thing.

--Aishwarya plays in front of her peers and Kumar watches from the seats and smiles as if remembering the true feeling of an audience, or maybe he is smiling at her.

--Aishwarya and Kumar lean against a wall and argue about Bach.

END MONTAGE

Each note they play is in tune, yet it is unnatural how their synchrony sounds unpleasant after all.

CUT TO:

INT. PRACTICE ROOM- MIDNIGHT

Kumar sits on a window ledge. His hands lay uncomfortably on his lap. They would have poked Aishwarya, if they truly existed.

Aishwarya examines his face, but he is gazing out the window. She opens her mouth to speak but closes it.

A beat.

AISHWARYA
Do you love me?

A beat.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)

Kumar? We've been spending a lot of time together. I just have to know if you feel the same way. I haven't met anyone at this school, in my life who understands me like you do.

Aishwarya's words trail off as Kumar turns his head.

KUMAR
I don't love you, Ash.

He takes a deep breath

KUMAR(CONT'D)

I'm a ghost. I wouldn't have been cursed in this perpetual state if I could love. You're not in love with me, you're in love with the music.

AISHWARYA
Are you implying that I don't know myself? My own feelings?

KUMAR
You're a kid. And I am only a stranger, Ash. You shouldn't take help from strangers.
Aishwarya scoffs.

AISHWARYA
What am I thinking? The audition is tomorrow, I have better uses of my time than to spend it with a monster.

Aishwarya clutches her violin and runs away, the door slamming behind her.

A single tear rolls down Kumar's face as he once again tilts his head at the sky.

CUT TO:

INT. COURTYARD- MIDNIGHT

Aishwarya stumbles through the courtyard, drunk on her feelings. The bar refused to serve her alcohol.

AISHWARYA
(In a slight British accent)

Who is Kumar to tell me who I can and cannot love. It is not his right to do so.
She spins around with her arms spread out.

The red Dodge is parked on the side of the solemn street. It's roof once again wide open.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
(Muttering)

Maybe I should take this baby on another spin.

Aishwarya hops into the driver's seat. She bends down under the wheel and bangs her fist, trying to reveal the ignition wires.

But a familiar voice interrupts her. Aishwarya peers up to see Betty smoking a cigarette and talking in the phone.

BETTY

I saw her again. I saw Aishwarya with that thing.
Betty takes a drag.

BETTY(CONT'D)
It's somehow helping her with magic. Changing her. She may beat me-.

Aishwarya jumps out of the car.

AISHWARYA
Hey! Are you talking about me.

BETTY
(Frightened but not ready to back down)
Don't presume that I would spend my night even thinking about you.

AISHWARYA
Enough. I heard you.
Betty drops the cigarette and kills the flame with the sole of her heel.

BETTY
(Sneering)
Fine. I knew you were doing something nefarious. There was no way you could be improving so fast. So the other night I followed you into the practice rooms and I saw you with *it*. Tell me Aishwarya how did you summon that thing.

AISHWARYA
Kumar is not a thing.

BETTY
So he has a name. I also heard your little love confession. Are you serious? Loving that monster.

AISHWARYA
He's not a monster!

Aishwarya throws herself at Betty. They wrestle on the University's lawn.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
How are you even planning on ratting me out? Huh?

Betty tries to release herself from Aishwarya's tight hold around her shoulders.

AISHWARYA(CONT'D)
(Frustrated)
Tell me.

BETTY
It doesn't matter if I lose. If I tell everyone in this school that you're a fake, they're going to believe me.

AISHWARYA
You didn't see anything alright.

BETTY
You've been acting strange. We've all noticed.

They pause, breathing hard and tired of fighting.

AISHWARYA
(Trying to convince herself)

I'm not sure what you mean. I'm only a violinist.

Betty notices the blue mist churning around Aishwarya's arms.

BETTY
Somehow I think you do.

Betty runs away and Aishwarya is left in anguish.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE - MIDDAY

Through the thin slits in the velvet stage curtain, a viola soloist plays.

Aishwarya stands with her violin tucked under her arm. Nervous, she wipes her sweaty palms on her pale Audrey Hepburn-esque dress.

In the corner of the stage, a misty face pops up.

AISHWARYA
Kumar?

Kumar creeps closer.

KUMAR
I know we left on rocky terms, but I wanted to wish you good luck. How can I miss out on the violinist who taught me AC/DC?

Aishwarya begins to cry.

AISHWARYA
(Choking on her sobs)
They know you've helped me. B-Betty saw us together.

KUMAR
It's going to be fine. What is she going to do, kill me? Send me away?
Aishwarya steps away shaking her head.

AISHWARYA
She knows I'm a fake. Everyone here could tell I didn't belong. No matter how much I tried...

KUMAR
Ash. You're here to prove yourself. It's time for you to go out there and show them up. Wasn't that the whole point?

AISHWARYA
Y-You're right.

KUMAR
You've got this. And remember, The Devil's Trill is just for us. Promise me you won't play it.

AISHWARYA
(Ignoring him)
I know. It's about me and the music just like it has from day one.

Kumar nods his head and vanishes.

Aishwarya wipes away her tears and takes deep breaths.

STAGE MANAGER(20) walks up to Aishwarya.

STAGE MANAGER
Are you Aishwarya Khatri?

AISHWARYA
I am.

STAGE MANAGER
It's your lucky day. You're on.

CUT TO:

INT. STAGE- MIDDAY- CONTINUOUS

Aishwarya walks onto center stage with her head held high. A panel of judges sit in front of her. Behind them, the entire orchestra sits in the audience, like hungry sharks watching the fish fight first. All the parents are here too, including Amma.

AISHWARYA
Hello. I will be playing The Devil's Trill.

JUDGE
I need your name and I have your piece down as something else.

Ignoring him, she holds her violin high and begins to play. She entrances the audience with her music.

AISHWARYA(V.O)
I thought I was proving something in this moment. I believed all those musicians would see something they've never experienced before. And somehow I was right in all the worst ways.

Whispering removes her from her flow. Amma and Betty sit next to each other. Amma wears a concerned face.

Aishwarya pauses, breathing hard. Her face sours.

A beat.

AISHWARYA
(Hysterical)
You shouldn't be telling Amma anything. I've done nothing wrong.

Amma screams.

Aishwarya rubs her forehead and drops onto her knees.

AISHWARYA
I don't feel so good...

Aishwarya's body folds onto herself as her arms burn. She screams out in pain. Wisps of glowing threads sew into her arms, attaching her violin to her body-like Kumar.

AISHWARYA
What's happening to me?

Her fingers fuse to the bow. The rest of her body begins to dematerialize into a soft blue.

Kumar appears.

KUMAR

The music became too much. Aishwarya why would you play that?

AISHWARYA(V.O)
I'm still not sure of the answer.

In a flash of light, Aishwarya becomes a ghost.

CUT TO:

EXT. PRACTICE ROOM WINDOW- MIDNIGHT

TEXT: HOURS LATER

A sole, artificial light shines on an enraged girlish silhouette shoving rows of stands and chairs to the floor. Shattering the silence, yells echo across the halls.

And a boy whispers next to the window, looking up at the midnight sky.

END.

INT. 1992 DODGE VIPER - DUSK(35mm Kodak Ektachrome film)

AUGUST(16), a withdrawn punk-rock violinist chases the setting sun. The Dodge's roof is popped open, and so the rushing winds kiss her hair. Her mascara once layered like Sharpie around her eyes, smudges on her face in battle markings.

Her phone rings that familiar Mariah Carey jingle. Lifting one hand from the pleather wheel, August picks up.

AUGUST

I know what you're thinking.

MA's(48) voice is scratchy, worn from years of attempting to pacify her daughter's hot-headed feelings.

MA

Baby, where are you? Are you okay?

AUGUST

I'm fine Ma. I'm coming home now.

MA

(Yelling)

Coming home?! You're supposed to be in your dorm. All tucked in and ready for 8 am rehearsal tomorrow.

AUGUST

But, they don't get me there. All those prissy musicians can't tell their instrument from their-who cares about them. I miss you. And Dad.

MA

You're not making any sense. And you know it. Tell me where you are right now

AUGUST

(Gritting her teeth)

I'm driving.

MA

You're what?

AUGUST

(Louder)

Driving. On I-95.

MA

You don't have a license. If I remember correctly, you hardly even have a permit.

AUGUST

It was an impulsive decision, alright?

MA

Whose car are you driving?

AUGUST

It doesn't matter. I borrowed it from a friend.

MA

You don't have any.

AUGUST

Now is not the time.

MA

Pull over.

AUGUST

But Ma...

MA

Just do it.

EXT. HIGHWAY - LATE NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

On the side of the highway, August parked the Dodge. She has reclined the driver's seat and placed her ripped-up converse on the dashboard. She holds her phone to her ear.

MA

You can't just give up like that August. Do you even know how much your father and I have worked to keep you in this school, to help you follow your passions? August don't fixate on friends, focus on the music. You can't worry about anything else.

AUGUST

(Crying)

I'm miserable.

MA

You've got to try. Come on now. Call

an Uber and go back to school. And make sure that 'friend' gets their car back.

AUGUST

Ma, please! I don't fit in.

MA

August come on now. Give the school a chance

AUGUST

(Her voice breaking)

okay, love you

MA

Love you too. I'll see you in less than a week. Goodbye.

Ma hangs up.

August pushes her hair back and reaches over to shuffle through the contents of the foreign cup holder. Her index finger grazes a cassette tape. Interested, she slips it into the car.

As she lays down and gazes at the night sky, the Eagles' Hotel California plays.

AUGUST

(To herself)

This isn't even real rock.

CUT TO:

INT. PRACTICE ROOM - MIDNIGHT

A sole stand is in the middle of a window-less room. A curious strand of wind brushes against some crumpled, worn pages of music sitting on a piano ledge.

It escapes August's notice as she rips a haunting melody from her violin. She plays Giuseppe Tartini's Violin Sonata in G minor, a.k.a. The Devil's Trill Sonata.

She stops mid-measure, turns, and sets her violin in an embroidered leather case. August releases a groan and slams the music stand onto the scuffed tiled floor. Immediately, she drops onto her knees.

AUGUST

(Muttering)

God, I hate it here. Ma just doesn't
get it.

A sinuous melody bleeds into the practice room.

Rising from her chair, she peers out to the dim hallway.

AUGUST(CONT'D)

(To herself)

Is someone there?

August rises. She grabs her case and leans out the doorway.

AUGUST(CONT'D)

Even I know it's late...

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

The eyes of photographed orchestra players have been *nastily* scratched out, leaving the walls patched like paper mache.

August creeps down the barren hallway, lingering next to each door, peaking her head in each room. But the melody continues, so August seemingly follows.

AUGUST(CONT'D)

(Singing to herself)

*There were voices down the corridor. I
though I heard them say... Welcome to
Hotel California... Such a lovely
place... Such a lovely face.*

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE

Clusters of equipment and bundles of wires litter the stage floor. The halo of a dark silhouette glows against the deep velvet curtains.

The strange melody crescendos as August ambles towards the human-like shadow.

AUGUST

(Softly)

Excuse me?

The silhouette lurches towards her like a drunken pirate.

August flinches.

AUGUST(CONT'D)

You shouldn't be back here this late.
You could get suspended.

The music ceases.

She faces a ghost, JAMES(UNKNOWN). The sleeves of his blazer are missing, leaving jagged scars to showcase a misty violin grotesquely sewn onto his arm. The skin on his wrist wraps tightly around the neck of the violin. His matching pair, the delicate bow, is fused like a sixth finger on his other hand. He lowers his arms, yet the instrument does not shift.

August gasps, the blood draining from her face.

JAMES

(Leering)

I welcome my new student with *open*
arms.

He spreads his distorted limbs.

August flinches, raising her hands protectively.

AUGUST

(Hysterically)

Who are you? What are you?

JAMES

Wouldn't you like to know...

AUGUST

I-I-I don't think I should be here.

JAMES

Why are you running when *you* summoned
me?

AUGUST

I did NOT call-summon you!

JAMES

Don't get it twisted. You did. It is
up to me to uphold the rules. I
believe you need help and I enjoy an
audience.

AUGUST

W-Why are you here?

But James ignores her as he lifts his arms and resumes his earlier tune. August is both entranced and disturbed as he sways to the piece. She begins to copy his mannerisms, mimicking the perfect melody.

Lost in the rhythm, she closes her eyes, and James is gone. The echo of music still reverberating.

CUT TO:

INT. THEATER- DAWN

Orchestra students dressed in strait-laced college wear spill onto the stage. Like a mongrel competing with refined show dogs, August walks up, a tattered leather jacket pulling at her shoulders, taking her seat behind the concertmaster. As she sits, BETTY(19), the first chair, leans towards THEO(19), her stand partner.

BETTY

(Eyeing August)

I spent ALL night practicing. That Strad just ages like fine wine, y'know?

THEO

Well, if you take too many breaks, you know who's here to catch you on your toes.

BETTY

I wish some people understood how cut-throat this school is. They would save time not *trying* too hard.

August rolls her eyes.

AUGUST

If anyone asks, my night was spent on the road, not a practice room.

Betty and Theo ignore her.

The CONDUCTOR(35) claps her hands.

CONDUCTOR

Let's get going.

She looks down and writes a note on her score.

CONDUCTOR(CONT'D)

I would personally like to release all
of you on time.

The conductor lifts her hands.

August raises her violin and places her bow gently on the D
string. She shivers thinking of James' figure.

The conductor signals the rhythm and sweeps her hands down.

August plays like a puppet to James' strings. The melody of
the score steals her control. She plays with an increased
verve, dancing with the music. The piece finishes, and she is
out of breath.

AUGUST

(To herself)

I've never played like *that* before...

Tuning out the conductor's instructions, August stares
forward at the audience seats.

She gasps.

James sits in the back of the concert hall. He smiles and
waves, his fused bow slicing the air.

AUGUST(CONT'D)

Oh my.

Behind him, is Ma. Wrinkles lessened, proud, and smiling at
her daughter.

August's face softens.

CUT TO:

INT. THEATER LOBBY- MIDDAY

August exits the stage, trailing behind the stampede of
musicians. She looks around for James, trying to identify
blue wisps in the crowd.

In the middle of the lobby, Ma stands alone with a brown-
paper lunch bag.

On sight, Ma hugs August.

MA

Oh, I've never seen you play like that

before. You sounded wonderful.

AUGUST

Yea Ma...It just happened so fast.

Ma cradles her face.

MA

I was worried for a second that you let up on your school work, but now I know you're okay.

AUGUST

Somehow, I feel more than okay.

Ma hands her the food.

MA

Anyway, last night I understood that you were feeling *homesick* so I brought you some *home* food.

AUGUST

(Still slightly dazed from her last performance)
Yeah thanks.

Ma turns to talk to some parents.

August flexes her fingers trying to understand what she just did.

CUT TO:

INT. PRACTICE ROOM- DUSK

August attempts to mimic her performance at rehearsal. Her violin is raised high, and her strings are definitely in tune, but she keeps messing up.

She gives up and paces back and forth.

AUGUST

I must seek him out. Whatever we did last night worked. This is my chance to get ahead and prove to all those sorry musicians that I'm more than good, *talented*.

She looks at the clock. It's 12 A.M.

AUGUST(CONT'D)
This was the time I started hearing-

The melody returns.

AUGUST(CONT'D)
-the music!

August rushes out of the room, her cherished violin and her bow clutched in her palms.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKSTAGE - MIDNIGHT

This time when August enters, James glows clearly under the stage lights. A gleeful look reflects from the black depths of his eyes. It's as if he's only living for the violin. For the music.

August clears her throat.

AUGUST
So... You're a ghost.

James lowers his arms and smirks.

JAMES
I wouldn't get caught up in the semantics of it all.

AUGUST
But you helped me. Today, I played like I never had before.

JAMES
And so you did.

AUGUST
YOU can help me beat Betty.

August gives him a wary look.

AUGUST(CONT'D)
I wonder, though, how did you become all-

She gestures with her hands vaguely.

AUGUST(CONT'D)
-attached?

JAMES

I was like you-all doe-eyed, excited.
And then I was let down by the people
closest to me. Maybe it was the hurt
that transformed me. Or the obsession.

AUGUST

You get me.

JAMES

Exactly why I'm here.

James lifts his violin. August lifts hers. And they begin to simultaneously play The Devil's Trill.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

QUICK CUTS:

--August walks in with her violin case, James waiting and writing notes on his sheet music.

--James and August laugh after he bumps her in the head with his violin-bow-arm-thing.

--August rants about her classmates' shocked reactions to her playing. James smiles as if remembering that feeling when he was once alive, or maybe he is smiling at her.

--August and James sit against a wall, their shoulders bumping, as they talk of the pleasant things in life.

END MONTAGE

Each note is played in tune, yet it is unnatural how their synchrony sounds unpleasant after all.

CUT TO:

INT. PRACTICE ROOM- MIDNIGHT

James sits on the window ledge. His hands lay uncomfortably on his lap. They would have poked August, if they truly existed, as she bent down next to him.

August examines his face, but he is gazing out the window. She opens her mouth to speak but closes it.

A beat.

AUGUST
Do you love me?

A beat.

AUGUST(CONT'D)
James? We've been spending a lot of time together. I just have to know if you feel the same way. I haven't met anyone at this school, in my life who understands me as you do.

August's words trail off as James turns his head.

JAMES
I don't love you, August.

He takes a deep breath

JAMES(CONT'D)
I'm a ghost. I wouldn't have been cursed in this perpetual state if I could love. You're not in love with me, you're in love with the music.

AUGUST
Are you implying that I don't know myself? My own feelings?

JAMES
You're a kid. And I am only a stranger, August. You shouldn't take help from strangers.

August scoffs.

AUGUST
What am I thinking? The audition is tomorrow, I have better uses of my time than to spend it with a monster with no heartbeat.

August clutches her violin and runs away, the door slamming behind her.

A single tear rolls down James' face as he once again tilts his head at the sky.

CUT TO:

INT. COURTYARD- MIDNIGHT

August stumbles through the courtyard, drunk on her feelings.
The bar refused to serve her alcohol.

AUGUST

(In a slight British accent)

Who is James to tell me who I can and
cannot love. It is not his right to do
so.

She spins around with her arms spread out.

The red Dodge is parked on the side of the solemn street.
It's roof once again wide open.

AUGUST(CONT'D)

(Muttering)

Maybe I should take this baby on
another spin.

August hops into the driver's seat. She bends down under the
wheel and bangs her fist, trying to reveal the ignition
wires.

But a familiar voice interrupts her. August peers up to see
Betty smoking a cigarette and talking in the phone.

BETTY

I saw her again. I saw August with
that thing.

Betty takes a drag.

August is shocked.

BETTY(CONT'D)

It's somehow helping her-with magic.
Changing her. She may beat me if the
music doesn't get her first-.

August jumps out of the car.

AUGUST

Hey! Are you talking about me.

BETTY

(Frightened)

How much of that did you hear.

AUGUST

Enough.

Betty drops the cigarette and kills the flame with the sole of her heel.

BETTY
(Sneering)

I knew you were doing something nefarious. There was no way you could be getting better so fast. So the other night I followed you into the practice rooms and I saw you with *it*. Tell me August how did you meet that thing.

AUGUST
James is not a thing.

BETTY
So he has a name. I also heard your little love confession. Are you serious? Loving that monster.

AUGUST
He's not a monster!

August throws herself at Betty. They wrestle on the University's lawn.

AUGUST(CONT'D)
How are you even planning on ratting me out? Huh?

Betty tries to release herself from August's tight hold.

AUGUST(CONT'D)
(Frustrated)
Tell me.

BETTY
I doesn't matter if I lose. If I tell everyone in this school that you're a fake, they're going to believe me. Anyway, this creepy relationship isn't sustainable. One way or another you'll crack.

AUGUST
You didn't see anything alright.

BETTY
You've been acting strange. We've all already noticed.

They pause tired of fighting.

AUGUST

(Trying to convince herself)

I'm not sure what you mean. I'm only a violinist.

Betty notices the blue mist churning around August's arms.

BETTY

Somehow I think you do.

Betty runs away and August is left in anguish.

INT. BACKSTAGE - MIDDAY

Through the thin slits in the velvet stage curtain, a viola soloist plays.

August stands with her violin tucked under her arm. Nervous, she wipes her sweaty palms on her pale Audrey-Hepburn dress.

In the corner of the stage, a misty face pops up.

AUGUST

James?

James creeps closer. He smiles softly.

JAMES

I know we left on rocky terms, but I wanted to wish you good luck. How can I miss out on the violinist who taught me AC/DC?

August begins to cry.

AUGUST

(Choking on her sobs)

They know you've helped me. B-Betty saw us together.

JAMES

It's going to be fine. What is she going to do, kill me? Send me away?

August steps away shaking her head.

AUGUST

She knows I'm a fake. Everyone here could tell I didn't belong. No matter

how much I tried...

JAMES

August. You're here to prove yourself. It's time for you to go out there and show them up. Wasn't that the whole point?

AUGUST

Y-You're right.

JAMES

You've got this.

AUGUST

I do. It's about me and the music just like it has from day one.

James nods his head and vanishes.

August wipes away her tears and takes deep breaths.

STAGE MANAGER(20) walks up to August.

STAGE MANAGER

Are you August Walkers?

AUGUST

I am.

STAGE MANAGER

It's your lucky day. You're on.

INT. STAGE- MIDDAY- CONTINUOUS

August walks onto center stage with her head held high. A panel of judges sit in front of her. Behind them, the entire orchestra sits in the audience, like hungry sharks watching the fish fight first. Including their parents and in this case, her Ma.

AUGUST

Hello. I will be playing The Devil's Trill.

JUDGE

I need a name and today you should be performing(insert solo) not that.

Ignoring him, she holds her violin high and begins to play. She entrances the audience with her music.

AUGUST(V.O)

I thought I was proving something in this moment. I believed all those musicians would see something they've never experienced before. And somehow I was right in all the wrong ways.

Whispering takes her out of her flow. She gazes into the theater seats and sees her Ma and Betty sitting next to each other. Ma wears a concerned face.

August pauses, breathing hard. Her face sours.

A beat.

The violin breaks into wood shatters as it falls onto the stage.

AUGUST

(Hysterical)

You shouldn't be telling my Ma anything. I've done nothing wrong.

Ma screams.

August rubs her forehead and drops onto her knees.

AUGUST

I don't feel so good...

August's body folds onto herself as her arms burn. She screams out in pain. Wisps of glowing threads sew into her arms, sculpting a violin-like James.

AUGUST

What's happening to me!?

Her fingers fuse to the bow. The rest of her body begins to dematerialize into a pale soft blue.

James appears.

JAMES

The music became too much. August why would you play that?

AUGUST(V.O)

It would take decades before I could find an answer.

In a flash of light, August becomes a ghost.

CUT TO:

EXT. PRACTICE ROOM WINDOW- MIDNIGHT

TEXT: HOURS LATER

A sole, artificial yellow light shines on an enraged girlish silhouette shoving rows of stands and chairs to the floor. In the silence, an echo of yells rings.

And a young boy in a blazer plays softly next to a window, looking up at the midnight sky.

END.

Hansini Mahajan

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Kathryn Schaefer

Category: Short Story

old names to remember home

Earl. Category 1. 1998.

The cadence of rain lulls my anxiety so much so that my heart flutters in my chest. Any faster or slower, and my rhythmic breathing would cease and spiral into a wretched yearning for oxygen. The windows in the trailer are barred shut—for good measure. To open them would let gusts of wind free, determined to wreak havoc on the only home I've ever known. That would be a mistake. I know that.

I huddle against my parent's bedroom door, my palm tightly covering my mouth. Each time I peek in, a similar scene is depicted. A white curtain drapes over Dad's figure like a body at the morgue. I'm not scared of ghosts, but his gentle dips up and down hinder me from walking in. You are not meant to feel safe in the eye of a hurricane.

"At this again?"

My brother's shadow accompanies me. I fiddle with his shoelaces rather than looking up. Mud lines his track shoes, and it's simple how he carries himself; he doesn't care for the mess he leaves behind.

Freddy crouches down and whispers, "You're too old to be scared of the storm."

"Who says I am?"

His mischievous crinkled eyes match mine. Freddy folds his arms under my knees and lifts me. I frantically kick my legs like I'm pressing on the pedals of a bicycle, but his hold only tightens. He trudges past the doorway and into the storm. While the winds warp against my skinny body and the rain soaks my plaid pajamas, I stare at my brother.

Freddy releases me and yells, "Fear simply does not exist out here, especially if you want to survive." His grip tightens on my hand. "Let's go."

I don't move, latched onto my spot in the queue of chaos.

The palm trees sway and braid like strands of hair under the frenzied gusts—blurred light bursts from the inside of other trailers. Our clothesline is weighed down, arching dramatically from the soaked clothes anchoring on.

We are blinded by flashing headlights and the slam of a closing car door. The rain parts around James, holding a green smock over his head like an umbrella. He frowns as if it requires a herculean strength to resist the storm's tears.

"What are you doing?" James reveals the chip in his front tooth.

"Freddy wanted us to face our fears."

James stalks over and wraps his arms around us. The warmth of my eldest brother shivers through my body. I couldn't imagine a place or person safer than here.

"Face these fears inside."

Frances. Category 2. 2004

I tell James the news.

As always, he sits on a cherry swivel stool, elbows glued to the kitchen table. The table's varnish is worn, yet the disguise is only revealed at sunset when the grazing light brushes its edges. In these spring-like conditions, piles of bills survive under the humid skies. And James is the one, with dirt packed under his fingernails, attempting to wrestle the weeds out. Dad says he will pay for the missing baseboards, and the rusty sink, and Freddy's broken retainer. But it's always James who takes care of it. I tell my brother not to on most days. Dad has never let us down, but tonight elicits a drowned-out response.

"Not right now."

James' eyes are cast down beneath his hands. I can't help but stare at them. Calluses sketch maps on his palms; I can't remember when they were smooth. I can't. Past the rigid topography, my eyes linger on the envelope pressed against his palms.

It's a familiar feeling—the one swirling in my stomach. My fingers reach for a doorknob when it starts. It comes in waves, mostly at dusk when the crickets and the big rigs syncopate at an intimate rhythm. There is a brass one screwed above my bed. Mom loved doorknobs. She used to joke that the polish spoke to her classy self, but she never promised herself harmony. You could look at her kids, and say just that. Each flimsy screen door in the trailer carries a different egg-like doorknob, though many are not bolted anymore. But somehow, the remaining ones all creak all the same. A feeling like that can only linger in my body when my brother, who always has something to say about everything, says nothing.

Freddy strolls in with a thick wad of duct tape.

"James is our savior, Margaret. Stop bothering him." He climbs a pale plastic stool and angles his head towards the window above the sink. Ripping a wad, he pastes layers upon layers against its edges until it resembles a fifth-place paper mache project.

Freddy adopts the role of handyman from time to time. Ever since he fixed Mr. Saul's toilet, he figures he can skip the engineering degree and directly graduate to being knee-deep in someone's pipes. James hasn't got the heart to tell him that he lacks a *rusty* thumb for plumbing, so he gives Freddy 'work' around the house.

I want to tell him, but James' troubled face stops my cries.

And I can't help but look away.

Dad stands over the porcelain tub. The rippling shadow of a Rolling Stone magazine reflects from the almost-murky water. He insists that to survive a hurricane; we must have water, so he fills up the tub and refers to it as a life source. I want to tell him that there is excess water outside; more than that could help. Instead, I lean against the doorway and bask in the rush of the tap.

Wilma. Category 3. 2005

"...Come back. Margaret needs you." A whisper shivers out of the speaker. I clutch the landline against my freshly-pierced ear, waiting for James. Freddy speaks softer, slower. The strands of his voice rub together to create a perfect eulogy. "I know you. I know you've always had big dreams. But we are a family of dreamers. Come home. We don't know how to handle the bills. Dad can't tell us. I'm gonna be frank, James, you left like a hurricane."

Static flies.

Irma. Category 4. 2017

With a coppersy groan, the dripping stops. The cloudy water is filled halfway, unable to last the storm—the shutters crash against the trailer in flinching thuds. I imagine the tub fills, and fills, and fills. With Dad's obituary and James' acceptance letter, and Mom's favorite brass door knob. It fills, and fills, and fills.

"Margaret."

Even the blond bits of Freddy's hair are drenched in gray. Dark circles ring around his eyes. He drops his green raincoat onto the tile and toes out of his rubber boots. A bucket collects water from one of the holes in the roof. He dunks his hands in and smooths back his hair.

"Margaret, not this again—"

My dry throat croaks, "The shutters are killing themselves outside. I'm serious. It's sickening the way it crunches. It sounds like someone is dying."

I sway on my feet like a seasick sailor. "I'm gonna rip it off."

I shove my fists into the pockets of my vinyl jacket. I shiver; it always sucks in all the worst places. I slip in my haste and knock the bucket over—the murky liquid splashes on Dad's rotting collection of rock magazines.

"Wait—Is this all we got?" Freddy gestures at the shallow tub.

"Dad must've started earlier."

He looks at me like I'm driftwood that won't make it to shore. "I know it's just the two of us, but... I'll always help you fill-up the tub."

Screeching metal wails in the distance.

Freddie and I jump.

My palms splay against the panes of the window. Across the yard, fiery sparks lay waste on Mrs. Martinez's trailer. Copper coils and wires sew into its soggy cardboard frame; the neighborhood power line has struck her home. The tarp-like roof punctures under the stolen debris—an explosion rings.

Freddy clutches his cell against his ear.

I can't look away. The inferno has leached itself onto the gutters, not hesitant in its fervor to touch every scrap. The lights are still on. I wonder, does Mrs. Martinez even know?

"911 isn't picking up. I'm going in." Freddy wrenches on his raincoat and runs out. Through the window, his dark silhouette shrinks and flickers against the burning pile. He holds the neck of his coat against his nose and jerks open the door. He barrels in with smoke rubbing against his heels. And then, I lose sight of him.

"No, no, no... This can't be happening." I abandon my coat, my shoes, my trust and rush out of the trailer. The wet grass slices the soles of my feet, and the cool rain sings my warm skin. The heat rises as I near the eruption, but I can't go inside.

Freddy doesn't live at home anymore. He stays with his girlfriend in the city, with a yelping spotted dachshund and a brand new job as a fireman. He is untouchable there, far away from our home that once inflicted blistering scars. It took him a while, longer than James, but he made it out of here.

While Freddy retreats from the explosion alive, holding a frail Mrs. Martinez in his arms, I wonder will this be the last storm I survive?

Michael. Category 5. 2018

I scan and beep and scan and beep. The steady pace is familiar. Each person I check out is familiar. From a distance, church bells ring in unison with tornado sirens. The store closes in thirty minutes, and it might feel longer if I stretch it out. Maybe my prayers were simple this time; the line of customers lingers from my check-out station all the way to the automatic sliding doors.

I scan, and beep, and scan and beep, and finally, only an older man weighed down by his corduroy bucket hat stands

before me. In his worn hands, he carries pale-pinkish kombucha and an opened pack of batteries.

The corner of his mouth turns up. "Now I hope the power doesn't give up on me this time; I'm not as spry anymore. I can't go wrestling with power tools in the midst of a storm."

"Will this be all?" I gesture to the items in his hands.

"It must."

It's easy in the rhythm to forget about the empty shelves and stolen samples. How desperate hands tried to find something from nothing.

"I'll look in the back for a generator."

"Oh no, it's fine. You should be getting home to your family. I've lived here long enough to know that it's always during the calm when the storm sneaks up."

I wonder, if Dad hadn't died years ago, would he have looked like this? Alone, but still clutching that streak of stubbornness. I guess the old man is right. Live here long enough, and everything becomes predictable.

"I insist."

I remove the products from his hold and hurry to the storage room, a space so cave-like that the door I opened offers the only light. My hands brush against dusty surfaces, and my gaze lingers next to heavy plastic containers. It's funny. This could've been a storm shelter if my cranky boss had ever opened his heart and let people in.

I lug back a bulky box to the man, and a big smile stretches across his face. I wave away any thank-yous.

I wish him well.

The stars creep across the horizon as I walk toward the bus stop. Brisk winds whip my hair around, so I tuck the strands behind my ear. Drops of water prick my skin, and for a second, I look at the sky in slow motion as millions of droplets hang above me like marionettes dangling on a string.

I tug the open ends of my raincoat against my chest and increase my pace. The water falls like cursed sailors leaping off a pirate ship. They fall desperately, hopelessly. But I can't catch them; I have to make the last bus.

The headlights are soft in the distance. My boots splash against the puddles as I race and race and race. As my fingertips graze the bus, all I am left with is the heat of the exhaust.

I clamber on the bench and wrap my arms around my frame. No one is here to catch me. It's weird to think there once was, but somehow the thoughts don't pain me. I remember the grief, but I don't remember when it faded away.

I catch a blurry figure swaying in the corner of my eye.

"Margaret!"

I squint my eyes. "James?"

He ambles towards me. And oh, how he's changed.

A scruffy beard covers James' face, and he's wrapped in a coat no Floridian would be caught wearing. He looks healthy. My mind spins back to when we were kids. Back when he wore plaid lumberjack shirts and sported a chip in his tooth. Back when he shook all the gifts under the Christmas tree. Back when he rose with the rising sun to sell newspapers for back-water change.

He slumps beside me on the bench, splashing water on my lap. In the haze, I can't tell if it's really him or just my

consciousness, self-preserving.

For weeks an unknown number had been buzzing and ringing, and I didn't believe it could be real, so I'd ignored it. He's been calling me, and I've ignored it.

I shake my head. "I'm going home."

He whispers, "Margaret, just talk to me."

"I've got to prepare the trailer. You know, the one I've been living in for more than 20 years."

"I'll come with you."

After Earl, Frances, Wilma, and Irma, I no longer wished for him to come home. I'm returning to school, saving for loans, and forgetting Freddy, Mom, and Dad. I can't hold on to memories anymore. Not when my future is ahead of me. Right here is where my heart resides. It's time he learned that.

"You're too late."

James' hand touches mine. "And you have changed enough to look at me and talk, so let's."

He lifts his gaze, and I follow to see Freddy's pick-up truck pull up. Freddy leans over to his right and jerks open the passenger door.

Freddy yells, "You can whine in the car. We'll face these fears at home."

Mohini Mahajan

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Raychelle Martin

Category: Poetry

A Floridian's Pastoral: From Heat-Waves to Hieratic

It's between waning tree rings of concrete houses / mailboxes buckling / atrophied fronds / that thirsty mist unable to absorb into the artificial / Palm to dry grass / feel the rumbling of copper pipes / clicking / not heartbeating / fingers tracing the circuit board 'neath the lawn / In my violent trance / if I gut / the parasitic skeleton from its / tender host and lounge naked on the driveway / with the metallic carcass all bloody / predator grin and dirt 'neath my nails / clutching the follicles / the wretched beast's final breath / Would it allow for streetlights to mold into groves / moist silhouettes pinned over the harsh suburbia / drowning in an inexorable feast / finally what i've yearned / For only after this ancient arson / emerges cattle grazing / satyrs and nymphs / painted by Lorraine / A humid fantasy.

Mohini Mahajan

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Raychelle Martin

Category: Novel Writing

Film Noir

Brief summary:

It's the spring of 1995 when Marlene Sharma, authority of the London art scene, suddenly disappears, abandoning both her lucrative place in society and her job as an illegal art conservator. After five months in suburbia, her past returns with a vengeance in the form of Wick Wallace, the eldest son of one of Britain's most wealthy families. He has swiftly adopted her world. From exhibitionist parties to the ritualistic worship of art divinity. Under the pressure of his business-obsessed father, he is forced to bring her back for a restoration project only she can complete. However, no one knows that under mysterious circumstances, Marlene has become entirely colorblind, halting her career. So, she had fled her seemingly perfect life in a frantic attempt to regain her vision. Through Wick's recent intervention, she discovers a new clue in one of his paintings and ventures on a time-sensitive journey to finally 'fix' herself. An intense story about struggle and anxiety, this reignites rivalries, strange coincidences and compels her to confront the Indian- American past she left behind. Grappling with her identity, Marlene solves the mystery of a war-torn painting collection and what happened to her. Ultimately, she must come to terms with her impairment and visualize a new future.

Excerpt:

A *Vogue* model inspired Marlene Sharma's shaggy, platinum hair. She bleached it weekly with an alloy of factory paint thinners, corroding her fingernails and the house's copper sink. The disguise held up well, but due to laziness or rather a recent loneliness, she allowed her black roots to grow back. The choppy piano-key edges hang limp, creating ghosts in her peripheral vision. In the last five months of suburbia quiet, with no human vessels, the ghosts were merely figments of a deep-set paranoia. But now, the squelching rhythm of flesh and heartbeats makes her nervous.

Marlene hears the refined bustling through the wall. Not shuffles and grunts but clicks and lilt. The sliver of light in the doorway flickers from passing figures, and her breath steadies. He trapped her here—a last resort.

She's lodged between a billiards table and the top half of a loveseat. Even in the vague darkness, it's strange to be here after all that's happened. She has the carnal instinct to claw her way out. Instead, her watery eyes stare at the 50's floral print surrounding the chamber, blurring in and out of focus. The distorting pattern seems to extend with an unusual depth. Yet as Marlene trails her fingers against the grooves, she only feels a shallow double-pronged vampire bite. She tries to imagine the katana that once hung here or the former antique room that enveloped the space. Has that ever truly existed?

The print fades.

“One of those Hayashi twins walked in the other day and begged me to sell it. I didn't think you would mind since, well.....”

Wick's sentences were always bereft of a punchline, waiting for a more anxious mind to fill it in. Or, in Marlene's case, more irritated.

The backlight from the hallway creates a hazy, almost divine glow around him. His lanky figure warps and billows under a velvet coat, triple-cuffed at a raw, freshly tattooed wrist. Marlene supposes, in this grand interruption, he needs something. His slender hands buckle under two familiar packages.

Wick closes the door, and the commotion muffles.

“You look young, y’know, with the—” He gestures to her hair.

Marlene winces. In the rough manner she was taken, she didn’t get to change her disguise. With her *Class of 1985* t-shirt, she distorts into the American girl who arrived three years prior. Back when she tried to fulfill simple corporate dreams in solitary obsessive work. A naïve effort that snowballed into an explosive partnership with Wick. A more adult innocence has overtaken her recently, a cloudy withdrawal.

“And you look tortured,” she whispers.

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Film Noir

A *Vogue* model inspired Marlene Sharma's shaggy, platinum hair. She bleached it weekly with an alloy of factory paint thinners, corroding her fingernails and the house's copper sink. The disguise held up well, but due to laziness or rather a recent loneliness, she allowed her black roots to grow back. The choppy piano-key edges hang limp, creating ghosts in her peripheral vision. In the last five months of suburbia quiet, with no human vessels, the ghosts were merely figments of a deep-set paranoia. But now, the squelching rhythm of flesh and heartbeats makes her nervous.

Marlene hears the refined bustling through the wall. Not shuffles and grunts but clicks and lilt. The sliver of light in the doorway flickers from passing figures, and her breath steadies. He trapped her here—a last resort.

She's lodged between a billiards table and the top half of a loveseat. Even in the vague darkness, it's strange to be here after all that's happened. She has the carnal instinct to claw her way out. Instead, her watery eyes stare at the 50's floral print surrounding the chamber, blurring in and out of focus. The distorting pattern seems to extend with an unusual depth. Yet as Marlene trails her fingers against the grooves, she only feels a shallow double-pronged vampire bite. She tries to imagine the katana that once hung here or the former antique room that enveloped the space. Has that ever truly existed?

The print fades.

“One of those Hayashi twins walked in the other day and begged me to sell it. I didn't think you would mind since, well.....”

Wick's sentences were always bereft of a punchline, waiting for a more anxious mind to fill it in. Or, in Marlene's case, more irritated.

The backlight from the hallway creates a hazy, almost divine glow around him. His lanky figure warps and billows under a velvet coat, triple-cuffed at a raw, freshly tattooed wrist. Marlene supposes, in this grand interruption, he needs something. His slender hands buckle under two familiar packages.

Wick closes the door, and the commotion muffles.

“You look young, y’know, with the—” He gestures to her hair.

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II. Strange Gatherings

Marlene stalks through the galleries with the familiarity one has when coerced to inspect the haunting echoes ricocheting from a basement at midnight. Her eyes comb through the darkness recognizing sharp-toothed demons and scaly monsters as rotten desks and lumpy couches, but the fear hastens her steps. Similarly, she detects the on-display relics comfortably in her line of sight. But now she protects herself from the arresting quality of the paintings.

The British Museum is more famous for its stolen artifacts, so Marlene can sink deeper and deeper, a mere spectator of pleading Elgin Marbles and Benin Bronzes. A sympathetic feeling does not course through her. Her former work directly correlated to the further misplacement of artwork that deserved to be displayed like these. Maybe not as chained up and homeless. But with family and friends. Her clients provided plenty of illegally held artwork. Hundreds of paintings she didn't care to ask questions about left to the sea of time. To her, beautiful things, no matter how ingrained into history, are not owed to the public. And it is a fantasy to pretend that the long galleries don't emulate a plastic, sticky, sweaty sort of energy. Not the refined aura of a *Veronese* over a sparkling dining table.

She stands in front of the gift shop dedicated to 'Unlocking Egypt'. She pulls out a piece of paper from her pocket. A few days ago, Harry Norman- a fellow conservator, sent her a note. *British Museum-11:30, Tuesday; RM. 306.* And in last night's frenzy, she overslept. She has been

following all sorts of leads in the previous couple of months to have something to do. But now, with Wick looming over her, she knows she can't miss this.

A guard approaches her. The uniform is too long on him, and his pant legs blend into the flooring.

“You need assistance, Ma'm?” his voice cracks. The man clears his throat and begins to repeat himself.

Marlene cuts him off, “-306?” She points to the room numbers.

He ushers her through a hallway and into a side staircase to the third floor. The exhibit is new, so fresh; a woman fidgets with a red banner onto the entrance. It reads ‘The Sublime: JMW Turner's Reality’.

She turns to the guard, “Are you sure this is it?”

A pitchy wail shatters the silence. Marlene crumples the letter she holds and instinctively leans towards the sound. The guard flinches and grabs her wrist. She shakes him off and slips into the gallery.

The temperature drops as if she stepped into a meat locker. Not only does the air feel contaminated with health violations, but the dim light further suppresses her depth perception. The first room is easy enough to ignore, with small, distracting watercolors.

Marlene can't see Turner's warm or cool or sunset impressions on the cold press paper. Her younger brother back in America, used to love to play with their mother's expensive watercolor set. He painted pages with blobs of ink bleeding into each other like blood stains. That's the only way Marlene can describe what she's seeing. It's lifeless without the color.

Her thoughts are interrupted by another shriek. She breaks into a sprint, running through the different exhibits. Turner's life flashes before her eyes in a 20's film reel. Seascapes,

Landscapes, Britain, Italy all of his phases passing by her in moments. She hears a muffled voice—a chapped tune sending shivers down her spine.

The screams cease in the encapsulating presence of the art. The paintings are colossal, covering the cubical room walls in its entirety. It's obscene how the wild frenzy of brushstrokes clutters her eyesight shamelessly. Marlene's eyes lock onto the canvas. The immense size alludes to the color field paintings. She saw his stuff at the Met a couple of years prior before she left for London. It wasn't uncommon for one to cry in front of a Rothko. She didn't at the time, but now her eyes brim with tears.

A thing is shivering in the center of the room. Harry looks toward her, his red-rimmed eyes tearing into her soul.

She hushes him with her words, focusing on him and not the paintings,

“What is your need?” She says.

“This curse is a weed,” he chokes.

“A lustrous solvent disintegrates

Of which an artist's hell imitates.”

Harry's limbs wave in ritualistic circles at their surroundings. She grasps his boney forearm and tugs him towards the doorway, leading him away from the madness. Claspng her palm over his watery eyes, Marlene drags him to the previous room with only sketches on the wall.

“Harry. Focus.” She grabs the side of his head. His eyes roll around like a pair of dice. He wears a suit with a tie tight enough to cut off his circulation.

“Okay, so you're also colorblind. Is that it?” Harry nods, finally looking at her

“When did this happen?”

“Last week” His voice is scratchy. “On the 28th. I woke up, and it was all black and gray. I went to the local guy, Dr. Thomas, and he gave a stupid diagnosis, stress or something, recommended to some fancy brain doctor in Chelsea. Said it was funny; a woman had similar symptoms a couple of months ago. Pointed me towards you.”

He coughs. Tears streaming down his stubble.

“I paid two thousand dollars for the checkup only to hear the problem is psychological, not physical. And that I’m crazy. They prescribed me bipolar drugs.”

“Did you encounter someone, get something in your eye? Can you think of anything that might have triggered it?” she says.

“You don’t understand. God has punished us. We have sinned, and now we will pay the price. Can you imagine a bigger consequence for two art conservators than their ability to see?”

“Then why did you send me this message?”

“I thought you could help. But Marlene, you look crazier and more treacherous than I remember.” She scoffs. One guy tells her she’s pure, and the next counts her sins.

Marlene tries to reason, speaking softer. “This has been a direct attack on both of us. So please try to tell me what you did to trigger this so-called curse.”

“I killed someone.”

“Are you sure that is what caused it?”

“Yes, a day later.”

“Well, who’d you kill?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where, How?”

He completely shifts once again.

“Why do you care? It won’t bring anything back. It won’t fix my failing business or your....”

The guard appears with a confused look on his face.

“Is everything all right here?” He asks, glancing between Harry’s disheveled look and her hands by his neck.

Harry pats the guard on the back and leaves.

Eric, the right-side neighbor, unlocks his door as Marlene approaches the old townhouse she calls home. The street is a long urban thing miles into the country. The hedges plastered to the door temporarily disguise his advancing figure. His tall father-tolled stance slouches as a large briefcase weighs him down.

“Hey, you!”

Marlene glances up from the sidewalk.

“My children live here. All your bustling late at night has been tolerated. But you brought the Wallaces here, and that will not be forgotten! I’ll call the cops next time!” With that, he slams the door.

Before her vision impairment, Marlene moved out of Wick’s apartment. Their relationship only functioned when she called the shots. And when Wick tried to take control, everything crashed. His decisions led them deep into Ackroyd business, a.k.a Wallace’s historic rivals. The stealing and kidnapping hit too close to home, so she temporarily decided to ditch the parties and focus on conservation. It wasn’t exactly temporary, though.

Marlene huddles in front of the door, but a new safety lock bars her from entering. She rings the bell- thirty times.

“Laurie? Are you there? Laurie!” The night sped up her exasperation

Marlene shoves her fingers into the crack of the door. Like a demon at the gates of hell.

Inside she sees a picture of Laurie and her parents sitting lop-sided on the wall.

A thumping of feet descends the stairs.

“Marlene? Of course, it’s you. Close the door.”

The door shuts, and soon enough, the safety lock is removed, and Marlene’s terrified roommate ushers her in.

“What happened?” Marlene lets out a tired chuckle as she sees the state of the house.

The long corduroy couch that balanced the room is not only torn up but tips to the back and onto what looks like their smashed dining table. There are holes in the kitchen wall near the cabinets, and all of the Herbert family knick-knacks are in pieces on the ground.

Laurie shuts the blinds and fastens a couple more locks on the door. She wears a hunting hat that covers her ears.

“After that Wallace kid grabbed you, the cops came thirty minutes later. They had a search warrant and ransacked the place, looking for some illegal holdings. They thought this place was one of their secret warehouses. See, the Wallaces apparently are holding drugs, guns, or something of the sort to sell overseas, and they’re trying to get them.”

Laurie’s father owns the place and thus left Marlene out of any official documents of residence.

“The police must have thought they had struck gold linking a convict and the glorified gang,” Laurie says.

Marlene chuckles, “They even managed to ruin their decades-long relationship with the police. I saw Wick today, and he’s become so weak. The next generation of Wallaces won’t survive this new millennium.”

“Maybe they were being fragile with you.”

“They don’t know what’s happened. You’re the only one I trust. It’s too risky to be labeled as unstable.” She places her coat on the wall. “And you didn’t see how we left things before I came here months ago. Total wreckage.”

“What do they want?” Laurie inquires.

“I’ve had some unfinished business for a while, and I believe if I do this, they’ll leave me alone. Did they find anything?”

“Saw the tray of pills in the kitchen and thought it was a great reason to keep looking. Dug up all your paintings and grimaced at Dad’s knife collection. Thankfully they didn’t find the biscuits in the pantry.”

On Monday, Marlene and Laurie went to the local jail to visit Mr. Herbert, her roommate’s father. On the way back, she had seen a car trailing them. That must’ve been how Wick had found her.

“How’s his case going?” Marlene picks up a couple of loose objects on the floor.

“I called him the lawyer after all of this. They said it might affect his appeal.”

Marlene gasps. “What? How? It has nothing to do with him.”

They sit against the wall. Leaning into the floral print.

“It’s his house. They found some dead cats in the backyard. The prosecutors are adding it to the evidence file.” Laurie rubs her eyes.

“What am I going to do? We’re running out of time?”

“Don’t worry,” Marlene says. “I’ll fix it.”

Marlene stirs the varnish in the pan. The warm solution will be used to steady the paint flakes, for the stabilizing and cleaning. The stinging smell wafts along the studio in laps, preying on the crumpling wallpaper. She walks over to the only window and rips off the screen leaving the crisp smog and barking dogs to bleed back into the studio.

It has been only forty-eight hours since she was forced onto the job. In that time she tidied up her studio. She got a little distracted and made a fort out of old canvas stretchers. Taking inventory she realized all her unfinished projects, one by one she sent back the clock, the sword, eighteen paintings and two sculptures. In the case of the destroyed painting, she would get one of her buddies to forge a replica.

On the counter, a vinyl player sits dusty. Music has been one of the first things to go, too distracting. It didn’t meld with her vision. Funny enough the senses were connected in some esoteric way.

The polaroids she took to carefully document treatments done on the paintings ribboned on the line. They did not clear up the compositions in fact they even blurred in different ways. It is like her and Wick, she grew up in a similar family business structure, on a much different scale, same but oh so different. They found it complicated.

She writes on the polaroid. *Stabilized 30th october 1992.* And hangs it up on the wall.

Now she must remove the old varnish. How is she going to do that if she can’t see the change in coloration? Marlene thought about asking Laurie for help. But she was already in enough mess with her father because of Marlene’s antics.

The phone rings. The electronic trills disrupt the comfortable silence. She sets down the blue light lamp and walks over to the on-the-wall telephone. The phone hangs off as if it tried to end its life.

“Hello”

“Is this Marlene Sharma?”

“Yeah it is. What's up?” She stares out the window. A little terrier dog with no leash walks past the studio.

“I'm Billy Weisman, director of the European Art Conservation Conference. I'm standing in for Julie Dashner for this year. I noticed you haven't responded to our offer for a presentation opportunity. Last year your talk about restoring the lightfastness on that print was a big hit.”

In January of '91 she discovered a new preventative way to treat lightfastness for graphite and she showed off her work by leaving a Sergeant in the Italian summer. It got her a lot of international jobs. But now, she glances over to the decaying Whistler on her work table.

“Look Bill, I would love to do it. I did some great work on a burnt Munch. But, I am really busy-”

“A couple of customers will be there if you are looking for interesting work. You're young, smart, this'll be a great way for you to work on bigger things.”

She looks across the street and sees a man sitting on the curb facing her direction. She can't make out his face, her farsight is damaged. *He can't be staring at me.*

“Not to mention it will be a fun addition to our roster.”

She focuses back on the conversation. Marlene has always been waiting for this. Whiling away her time with Wick was always for fun but what she really yearned for was a career. A

chance to be a part of the art she fell in love with without dependencies on her family or the Wallaces. But now she can't do any of that.

“It’s not a good time.” She hangs up.

Marlene goes back to work and two hours later she removes all the varnish. Next she will attach it to a new canvas backing. But her head is aching furiously and she closes up the shop.

She opens the door and turns around. Across the street is the same man from earlier watching. Marlene moves towards him. He gets up from the curb and walks away. She chases him.

She starts to walk home. The man had a gruff stride before she lost him and a long trench coat. It was a dark shade contrasting the light buildings. Marlene racks her brain trying to figure out if she knows why someone is following her. The rain soaks her hair. Even the blond bits turn a damp shade. She waits under the roof of a bike shop trying to figure out where she is.

Closing her eyes she slowly calms down. She just needs to focus on this job. There is no time for following strange men. Marlene opens her eyes and a face is inches away from hers.

She yelps and stumbles backward. His silhouette towers over her. Closer now, she can finally recognize the face.

“Arthur? What’s going on right now? Why are you following me?”

“It’s been a long time. I like to keep track of the people around here. Especially with ones who owe me.” A sluggish grin flashes on his face.

Owe? Marlene has long paid off her debts. She would be aware if she has an issue with an Aykroyd. Except for the business she left Wick with so many months ago. He still hasn’t cleaned that up?

“Wait!” And he walks back into the haze of rainfall.

Marlene wavers in front of Wick's apartment door. The humid rain lets her escape Arthur Ackroyd but it doesn't spare her from the damp appearance she awkwardly dons. She slams her open palm on the door like a policeman would. The door swings open. A woman with sharp eyeliner and red hair balances in front of her on platform heels.

"Marls!" She pulls Marlene into a tight hug. The scent of the salty ocean fills her senses. The embrace lingers, neither wanting to let go. Rosaline was in highschool when Marlene began to hang out with the Wallaces. Wick used to invite her to all the family meetings, for they were a partnership in the growing art enterprise. He was always nervous that their risks would fail and wanted her to be the wild card that could save him from his fathers wrath. Of course, her business experience never let them down.

Rosaline is one of Wick's second cousins and took an interest in her as a cool older sister. But now the nineteen year old is taller than the last time they saw each other. But, she is wearing a shirt stolen from Marlene's closet, *Tears for Fears*.

Marlene breaks the hug. Her heart is still pounding.

"Where's Wick? I need to talk to him. It's urgent." The sound of classical music seeps from behind Rosaline.

"He might be hard to reach. He's hosting his weekly art gathering thing."

"I went to a party three days ago, Wick's already hosting another one?"

"No," Rosaline sighs. "It's not so trivial like a party, it's an event that's dedicated to the art not the artist."

“Uh huh” Marlene looks at her skeptically. Rosaline ushers her over the piles of paper at the foot of the doorway. Her iron grip steers her around the sharp corners of the narrow hallway leading into the living room.

“And you’ve gotten into art recently? Or did your Aunt Carol send you here to watch Wicky.”

“No, nothing like that...” She trails off. Rosaline looks at her somberly.

“Oliver died a couple days back, and Aunt Carol hasn’t spoken to anyone outside the immediate since, all angry that he was murdered in one of the skirmishes. She wanted to invite you to the funeral next Thursday, but Wick told her to leave you alone.”

Physical violence has always been a part of Wallace business but between the police raid and Oliver's death it seems that things have gotten out of control. She suspects it has something to do with her yank into the sinking ship.

“I saw him on Tuesday. What-”, before Marlene can respond she is thrust into the chaos. Her mind is still spinning.

A dozen people amble around the living room, circling an oak table at the center. The walls are bare leaving the show for the painting sitting on it. An extreme change from the bohemian atmosphere that filled the space a couple nights ago. The room is lit by candle light, leaving the people who occupy it set in a still-life-esque glow. Their radiating eyes twist in Marlene’s direction. The speaking ceases.

Unlike her homecoming party a couple nights prior, this event is reserved for the spectator not the artist. For the people who have a penchant for the mystifying, viewing a painting is a drama in itself. A single picture intertwined in history, from its creation to where it

hangs. The whole thing would've been quite romantic for Marlene, but she has a distaste for the worshiping.

Wick separates from the crowd wearing a fedora and sunglasses.

Wick breaks the silence. "What brings you by, Marlene. I thought you hate these things?"

Marlene steps closer so they stand inches apart.

"I didn't know it was an ongoing event otherwise I wouldn't have come near this place.

That doesn't matter, I need to talk to you.", She whispers. Wick looks uninterested.

"It's about the-"

All his sweetness from years ago are nowhere to be seen. He interrupts.

"Well it can wait until after the night's festivities.", he pauses and cheers erupt. The people milling around resume their chatter and Marlene's pleas fade.

"After all you're here, why don't you partake?" Wick smirks.

Marlene is unsurprised at his new confidence. Unlike at the last party where her influence was obvious, he wouldn't back down in his own domain.

"Of course, I would love to." she mocks in a long drawn out voice. The sooner it ends the sooner they can deal with this Ackroyd business. And Marlene's assistance will definitely speed up the process.

They walk towards the table and he takes himself to the head of the table. A couple of people part to let her in. Arriving at the edge, Marlene flinches at the painting. The color was like if one closes their eyes, the kind of indescribable oblivion. She averts her eyes and instead looks at her surroundings.

She sees Rosaline across from her standing next to an older guy. His arm slings around her shoulder and they speak in hushed whispers. Rosaline's smile scrunches up her face. *She's definitely not interested in art*, Marlene thinks.

Wick begins speaking.

“Tonight's strange gathering is fixed,

The painting brings a transfixed,

State in which we must view,

The artists intrinsic debut,

We will dedicate our mission,

To analyze and listen-”

Marlene has never shown up to one of these parties and has no idea what to expect. She whispers to the woman next to her.

“Where did he get the painting from?”

“It's a loan from the Bennington Gallery in France. New guys have been coming around and Wick wants to impress them.” She nods her head to the end opposite Wick stands. Two men stand.

“-Now those who convene,

Will begin the scene”, Wick's speech ends.

“Not only seeing is believing, doing is believing”

The night disintegrates into a festival. People drink, people party, and Marlene watches as he stands like a king. But then she questions. Simple at first. What if we look at it from below, at the patterned oil splotches. What if we drown it beneath the London night? And the beings watch and revolve in a spiral around her. Asking, What do you mean, and she says, what if we burn it?

So they find those matches from downstairs. And plead the old Indian man who works at the restaurant to sing a prayer.

Wick grasps her by the shoulders, “What have you done?”

“These paintings are seen as mythical, we should ground it into reality by burning it. All we’ve done is separate us, I want to get closer to the feeling.”

And as it burns she witnesses the colors she has been looking for and oh, it feels so good.

Marlene calls Laurie to pick her up at Wick’s place. She can’t walk home in her bewildered state. She understands that she hallucinated the colors but it still leaves her like she felt a couple months ago, empty. But now that she gets a taste, she is craving the feeling unlike before.

To test last night, she lights every one of Wick’s gifted paintings over the year into flames. The police had already dug them up, it would be a failed experiment if she didn’t take the opportunity. Not only does this psychotic impulse feel useless but it proves nothing has changed regarding her vision.

Marlene does not get into the studio till midday a couple days later. She walks up to the door and sees her favorite Wallace.

“Hey Marls.” Today the girl wears an all dark outfit. She stands awkwardly.

Marlene’s voice is still gravelly from the exhaustion.

“What’s up Rosy?” Marlene unlocks the door and switches on the lights. The ocean in the studio has reduced greatly and it is only a puddle now. She stares at the Whistler on the table and

doesn't even blink. Over the last week, she has done a lot of looking at the painting and the black and white oblivion doesn't even faze her.

"What'd you think of Wick's party?"

"I thought it was transformative."

"Really?" Marlene gives Rosaline a stoic look.

"I don't understand why you go to Wick's little gatherings. Art guys are not it. Trust me. Find a nice English major from your college. Or a guitar player."

"Let me guess, you saw Finch. He's not an art groupie. He studies math, we've been together for a couple months now. I wanted to take him to a party. He's sweet, kinda like you and Wick were."

Marlene sighs, "Wick and I were never like that."

When they met, Marlene was still upset over her last boyfriend, Barrett. Even though Wick and her became close to inseparable, for Marlene, it never progressed into love. Marlene opens the fridge looking for a solvent she brewed a couple days ago.

"Look, is there something you need? Cash? A place to stay? Food? I'll happily supply or talk with Wick if you want."

"Wick sent me here for protection. Said you needed someone to keep an eye out."

Rosaline flashes a gun in her jacket pocket.

"Do they give guns to all of y'all for your birthdays? Oliver did the same thing. Flashing his weapon around. Give me that."

Marlene holds her hand open for the item. Rosaline places it into her hand.

"And that's why you shouldn't be carrying this around. Don't give your weapon to anyone, people will use it against you."

Rosalaline rolls her eyes.

“This is serious. Go home.” Marlene waves her off and Rosaline walks out the door. She notices that Rosaline lingers outside. Marlene knows she can’t leave her post, but won’t put up with a teenager playing Indiana Jones.

It has been three hours of work (or lack of work) when Wick walks in. He noticeably grimaces at the state of the studio. He walks over to the puddle in the center of the room and touches the rain water. He looks up and sees the moldy wood.

He has a cigarette.

“Your getting smoke on the paintings”

“I think I can fix the hole.”

Wick couldn’t fix anything with his artist hands. Once they got stranded with a flat tire in Barcelona. It was too hot to think and it must have been strange to see two formally dressed college aged students struggling with a pick up truck.

“Why is Rosaline the protection? She should be studying for her classes so she won’t become a drop-out like us. And the safety is serious. An Ackroyd hanging around is not something I need.”

“I told you. I figured that out a long time ago. Rosaline needs to work the steps like all Wallace’s do.”

“Like Oliver? What happened to him? I don’t know what mess your family has fallen into, but it would be smart to leave the kids out of it.” Marlene always wished her father hadn’t been so quick to isolate her and her brother. Maintaining family loyalties is key.

Wick ignores her pleas.

“I still don’t know why you left”

“I left because you got into a mess when Arthur Ackroyd, the same mess we are in now.”

“That’s not why”

“Maybe because I can't handle it.

“It’s not the same without you, You're right Oliver is dead and it’s all your fault.”

Wick suspects that something was wrong. He had seen her avoiding looking at paintings.

It was time to test that theory.

Before Wick leaves Marlene says, “Oliver told me that...Please do that for him.”

Marlene gives Rosaline her gun back. Tucks her hair behind her ears gently brushing her earrings.

“Rosaline I’m not going in for the next week, I have a conference to attend. Tell Wick if you want”

Rosaline asks for a souvenir “Get me one of those vintage spoon things with the bells”

Sees the Ackroyd across the street. Marlene shivers.

Marlene and Harry meet up on a small patch of land near the Thames. She recognizes his conflicting outfit and thanks Laurie in her head. He faces away from her, seemingly looking at the blocked horizon. The dewy grass... She taps him on the shoulder and his head whips back in a grimace.

“Hey” she chokes out. She takes a silent step closer to him and notices his forehead glistening with sweat. Harry nods, his mouth pursed as if holding back a yawn. Only a moment later, he doubles over coughing.

Marlene points to her leather briefcase. “I’ve had a breakthrough in the case.” She takes a key from her pocket and unlocks the clasp.

“Where’d you get it”

“You know I can’t disclose that”

Marlene shuts the townhouse door quickly. She narrowly misses the angry father next door. She pities him, in fact-sympathizes with him. Marlene doesn’t want to burden the neighbors with all of her old problems. She opens the shutters a little to let only the moonlight in and sees a second figure in her reflection.

“Ahh!” Marlene shrieks. She turns around, taking a deep breath. Laurie stands bewildered, holding a broom like a spear.

“What’s going on? Is there someone outside” Laurie asks.

“No. You scared me. Sorry I’m really jumpy right now.” Marlene shrugs off her scarf and leaves it on the hook by the door. She now clearly clocks her surroundings. It seems cleaner than earlier.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve been cleaning up the place. Getting my mind off things. I ordered some pizza for dinner, if you want some.” Laurie nods towards the kitchen. She begins to resume sweeping.

“No. No. No.” Marlene grabs the broom from her and ushers her to the couch.

“How is the trial going? With all the mess today, we can’t ignore what your dad told us at the prison. This’ll help with the appeal.”

“Is this stuff bad for the case?”

III. Esoteric Thinking

The last time Marlene was on a plane was from the same conference and had almost fainted and conveniently forgotten about the violent airsickness. She clutches her briefcase and

looks down the aisle. She peeks inside, as she has done twenty times in the last hour to ensure that the painting remains there. The crinkled edges make her chuckle. Harry will actually murder her for this.

A fifty year-old man is seated next to her. He reads a book by one of those American authors. He wears a hat from her hometown.

“Where are you from”

“Saint Louis.”

“Oh me too! I used to live by the gas station off Maryland.”

He says he’s visiting his daughter in Austria. And she laughs and laughs and laughs.

The Mayflower hotel she is hosted in is at the edge of Linz, Austria. It is a rickety old thing with the marble facade cracking and the golden double doors squeaky. Maybe the restorers could have a team building exercise fixing the place up. During World War two it was where the royalty stayed during the bombings and whatnot. The gold embedded in the walls was looted by guards who sold it down the stream.

Marlene checks into the hotel with few issues and they hand her a plastic badge with her name on it. Marlene Sharma. She wears a men’s suit, one of Wicks. It is a tweed brown, well she thinks. She lingers in the sculpture garden at the back patio of the hotel.

The dragon's mouth is open with stone fire blowing out of it. The whole thing obsidian. But Marlene found that the whole thing was sane. The dragon, though sculpted in an

impressionist style and it protects the garden with its sharp teeth, lacks the addictive quality she yearns for. In this state of questioning Marlene still clocks her surroundings.

“Francis, how's it been going?” She then turns around and sheepishly pushes her sunglasses back to the bridge of her nose. Her eyes had become more sensitive after the night with Wick.

Francis is an old employer. She gave Marlene very hot jobs.

“I have a job for you. What would you say about fixing up a Hokusai?”

“No I can't I am busy”

“What would you say about going on a date with me then?”

Marlene smiles and walks over to give her a chaste kiss on the cheek. She tells her a little about why she's here though certainly not about what's happened. They make some plans next time Francis is in town. They were always good to each other like that.

“ I was in one of those flea markets, looking for onions. And a teenager walks up to me, starts tapping on my shoulder. I ignored him, because I was arguing with this salesman. He was trying to sell me this lettuce with so much mold, but I wanted the green onions. Anyway I kept feeling these taps on my shoulder then I said “What!” The audience stands watching her.

“He hands me this painting and wads and wads of cash. He wants me to restore this painting for his grandmother's birthday. I can't refuse, but I noticed it was really weird.”

The audience of mostly men looks at her with a grimace. What is this girl about?

“Wait a minute-” Marlene thinks, she might not get away with it.

But another man notices the concerning x-ray to the right. “What's on there?”

They discuss it a little bit

“You see why this is concerning?”

“I figured out, it shows that this is a forgery.”

Marlene had taken a false x-ray to try and grab their attention. It worked.

They do a lot of tests and such. She has more evidence to bring to Harry.

Barett comes out of hiding and gives his cocky little smile. He says he knows how to help her-they talk about their relationship. Marlene ditches him. “I have lunch with Francis.. You know the director.”

“And he walks up to me all cocky. ‘Hey Marls’ Like who do you think you are?”

“I could totally see right through him.”

The buzz of the phone replicates Rosaline’s laughter. Marlene sits on a small chair by the window, stretching out the phone wire across the room. She removed all the decorations in the room because they gave her too many headaches. Though if this were an apartment, she’d lose her deposit. She had called Marlene in tears after Oliver’s funeral. And to cheer her up, Marlene tells her a little of today’s mess.

They discuss a little bit.

“Oh wait a minute, I’ll call you back.”

“Ooh is that Barett? Don’t let me interrupt.”

“Shut up!”

“Hello?” She says, trying to suppress her giggles on the phone.

“Marlene.” Ugh. Wick.

“I’m busy. What do you want?”

“Don’t forget about this job.”

“Why are you hounding me? Who cares.”

“It was already overdue when I got it to you. Don’t mess this up or you’ll be mistaken.”

“I am at a respected conference at a legit place. You’re jealous. You’ll get it, trust me.

And then we don’t ever have to talk again.” Marlene’s mood has officially been spoiled. Talk about her and Wick. She considers calling Rosaline, but decides against it. She turns on the shower. The rhythm of the water crashes against her unwelcome thoughts.

She walks over to the painting and looks at it. She squints her eyes. Turns her head. But it refuses to speak to her. She has become mute in the world of art. Marlene hears knocking at the door. She feels like a caught kid. She swings it open and sees a waiter. The woman stands uncomfortably.

“Is this Marlene Sharma?”

“I didn’t order anything,” Marlene starts.

“Mr. Newman requests to see you in the lobby. Says it’s a work thing.”

It’s almost 11:00 at night. Marlene reaches to her hair and smooths it back. A drawn out sigh escapes her mouth. She and Barrett don’t have anything to say to each other. It will be a conversation full of awkward reminders of her past. But she has nothing better to do.

Marlene takes a long shower and changes her clothes and goes down to the lobby. She sees Barrett standing near the front desk, smiling at the man. The clerk walks into the back and hands him a large flashlight probably used by graverobbers.

She takes a seat on the velvet bench behind the desk. Marlene notices his combat outfit and trimmed hair. Barrett, as if he could feel her stare, turns slightly. The eye contact is brief because Marlene quickly looks away. She doesn't want to let her secret out.

“So...” She says breaking the silence. Barrett mouths ‘wait’. He thanks the clerk and leads her past the lobby into the cold air of the street. He waves to the taxi outside.

“While you were at lunch with Francis I decided to do a little research.” He pulls out a piece of paper. “You’re apparent ‘forgery’ had the words... on the back, right?” Marlene hesitantly nods.

“But it was put there after at least multiple restoration. Nothing to do with the original owners.” Marlene says.

“Well I recognized the name as local, so I decided to check it out anyway. It’s closer to the source than we may have thought.” He gestures towards the taxi. His bare hands tremble in the cold.

“That’s it? I need more information. Who’d you talk to? Where are we going?”

“It’s about an hour drive away. Trust me, I’ll explain.”

The problem is, Marlene doesn't trust him. He was doing suspicious things before lunch and after the cataclysmic way things ended, she doesn't believe his sudden burst of generosity. But, this painting's history is the key to curing her vision.

Marlene gets into the taxi. He tells her “ The restoration people apparently got eighteen Les nabis paintings from a bank. The bank got it from this old house in the countryside that hasn't been touched in 50 years. It'll give us clues to the owners and a paper trail back to the artist.”

It is midnight when the black cab pulls up to Marlene's house. She'll need to deposit the Whistler painting back later. But for now it will stay under Laurie's bed.

She begins to exit the taxi when she hears the familiar click of a revolver and feels cold metal against the back of her head. She reaches for the knife in her coat pocket.

"Sharma, let's not get into a brawl on the street." He says.

Her location is no longer secure. In the last week she has been followed by the police, Wallaces, and now Theo.

The taxi driver notices Marlene's frozen body.

"You need something, Miss? Is this the right spot?"

She leans into the car and slaps forty pounds on the dashboard. Shutting the door she turns towards Theo and slams her suitcase into his body. On cue, the driver backs up and pushes him onto the pavement.

The revolver bounces onto the ground and Marlene swiftly picks it up and tucks it into her suit jacket. Theo groans in pain and clutches his head. His body sprawled into a star shape. "Now what am I gonna do with you?" Marlene mutters. She pulls out the knife from her pocket and stalks toward him. The glint shines into space.

Theo begins to rise but she pushes him back down.

"You take pride in threatening people? Huh? Three years and all I get is a gun to my head?" She sees the tacky little Rolex on his forearm. She slams his wrist into the pavement and hears the crunch of thousand dollar diamonds.

The watch is probably a gift from Marcus. Theo hails the ground he walks on.

“I bet Marcus still chops off the fingers of the unloyal ones. He’ll be so disappointed in you for getting marked.” She laughs dryly.

“I’m your brother!” he sputters, attempting to yank away his arm. His whimpers echo in the night's silence.

The brother who double-crossed her many times over.

“Why are you here? To fail in apprehending me. All you've done is embarrass yourself.”

She lets him go and brushes herself off. (makes a mistake due to colorblindness-then realize he’s not worth her time) Theo is not worth her time. Shouldering her duffle bag and painting she stalks toward the house. Theo limps in front of her, favoring his left leg.

“I need Mom’s ring.”

Talks about his engagement to Lily

“It’s still at home- in one of my storage complexes.”

“What's the password?”

“There’s not just pretty little rings.” Marlene chuckles. “And what about me, I want to get hitched one day too.” And that pang for Barrett amplifies in Theo’s hometown presence.

“Ahhh- you’re still heartbroken over Barrett, he’s long over you.”

She sees the clock on the wall- Harry.

“As lovely as this reunion’s been, I have to go.” And with that Marlene guides him to the door and wishes him a safe goodbye.

“Don’t ever come back.”

Tries to talk to Harry but he's not home. Leaves him a note telling him who he's killed. Is angry that he is ignoring her.

IV. Derelict Countryside

Marlene has always admired Lorraine's pastorals. Theo struggles to escape his man idea because she's better than him. The natural surroundings mixed with the man made universe. And in this black and white struggle more with colorblindness countryside, she imagines herself in a negative photography way. The man made becoming angelic to the artificial grove. She sits in the passenger seat of Theo's truck squinting at a map which she can barely distinguish road for road.

"Take this one!" Marlene says, pointing to the passing exit. Theo swerves the car and they hit a pothole bouncing inside the car. Theo says something, but she can barely hear him over the blasting music.

"Huh?" She yells. Theo turns down the music, getting a glare from Marlene.

"I said, couldn't you have picked a place any closer to the city?" At this point they were on hour six and still had at least half a day of driving left.

"It might be hard for you to understand but having all my stuff far from Marcus and the city is strategic. This way it keeps the location secure and allows me enough time to escape if things go sideways."

"Is that what you did? Escape? No one was chasing you." Marlene let out a grumble. No one needed to physically drive her out of town. Marcus and his overbearing ways basically left her no choice.

Theo is filling up gas and smoking a cigarette. Marlene gets a call to her cellphone.

“Yeah?” Marlene gets out of the car and moves to the back area of the gas station. It’s really messy and ugly.

“Harry is dead.”

“What happened?”

Marlene rummages through the back of the truck. Theo approaches her drinking a coke.

“You lookin’ for something?”

Marlene spots what she needs. “Give me the lighter you’ve been lighting all those cigs with.” She snatches it out of his outstretched hand. She takes some of the gas dripping from the pump. In a desolate area a couple meters from the truck she lights Harry’s painting. She doesn’t find relief because it burns in a black in white clump like a scratch on a film reel. The smell wafts in circles.

“What are you doing!” Theo says.

“Some things that are better done miles away from everyone else.” Marlene says deadpanned. A flicker of sympathy flashes on his face.

“You’re not getting in my ride with your gasoline stained clothes.”

He makes her change into one of his crewnecks. But the similar clothes don’t make them look more like siblings.

Marlene and Theo arrive at the storage locker. Though off-base, it looks ordinary on the outside. She suggests parking in a small grove of trees on the outskirts so as to not be a victim of

Grand Theft Auto. Inside the place is cooled by a two by two feet fan which blows the sign-in sheet. Theo looks out of place.

“I think the last time I came was in ‘91 or ‘92? I just remember it was freezing and the same fan was running.” Marlene chuckles. She leads him to the last row of lockers and the handle feels burning to the touch. On a countdown both of them manage to wrench the garage-like thing open.

The harsh sunlight covers the items in shadow, forcing Marlene to walk inside scrunching up her eyes. She makes out a couple of file compartments, a covered up canvas or two, and some thrifted curtains. These items only fill up a tenth of the space, the rest lined with a thick layer of dust. Marlene forgot how little she owns when all is said and done. Theo seems surprised as well because he also wears the family curiosity wrinkle on his forehead. He whacks the curtain a couple times with his hand. “That’s it. Oh, thank god.” Theo gets down on his knees and kisses the ground.

“What? WHAT?” Marlene says. Theo starts hysterically laughing.

“I thought there was gonna be a dead body in there! The whole time you were being so ominous.”

“Has Marcus seriously never shown you the ‘basement’?” Marlene says.

A shocked look flashes on Theo’s face.

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding. I promise.” Marlene slings an arm around Theo’s shoulder.

“Let’s look for that ring.”

“So, who’d you think I murdered?”

“I haven’t seen creepy ol’ Uncle Jim in years. Me and Lila thought you offed him.”

“Oh Jim is up in Vermont working in some fishing supply store.”

“That’s nice.” He looks over at Marlene’s sly smile.

“No!”

Marlene just walks away, her shoulders bouncing with giggles.

Marlene and Theo sit at a diner. She consumes a banana split while Theo dips his fries into a milkshake. All the years of tension have dispersed. They have had time to develop away from each other and now truly sees the other for what they are.

“Lila and I have a place now far away from everyone else. If you want to, you can stay with us for a couple days.” While he mimics nonchalance, she can see the sentiment in his eyes. Marlene exhales loudly.

“I have to get back to London soon. It’s been lovely seeing you but I can’t stay right now.”

“You don’t have to see *him* or anyone from the old gang. Just you, me and Lila. Don’t be scared.” Marlene doesn’t want anyone to discover her condition.

“I can’t see anyone like this. Look at me, I’m a mess. You honestly thought I killed some dude and locked him in a storage locker.” Marlene winces. “And I don’t want you to get worried, but I have to get back to London. The wrong people have eyes on me.”

“Let me help you.”

“I want this so bad. But, I can’t. I just can’t” Marlene hasn’t accepted anything yet.

“Just drop me off back at the airport and I’ll take a red-eye back.”

Theo unlocks the door and they slip into the house, the siblings stand there in the back room. Her silhouette heightens with each passing car, light tripping through the windows.

Marcus noticed the joining figure-assumed it was Lila.

The first thing out of place is a sandbag lodged in the doorway. It would have propped any other door slightly, but the cheap thin linoleum leaves it hanging wide. She sees, more like senses, a dark shadow looming over the studio in the afternoon shadow.

The street is seasoned with scattered newspaper from the parade that came through yesterday. Marlene uses her foot to sweep some of the confetti in a pile away from the entrance. Barrett told her before she left to be quick. Though it's quite soothing to tidy up the front of her former studio. She doesn't want it to look weathered, it was once her empire. She bends down to pick up an empty beer bottle when she sees a glister of red on the tile floor.

The glass drops from her trembling hand and shatters on the pavement. A strangled gasp escapes her. She barrels inside to an eerily calm scene.

It's Rosaline Wallace and Arthur Ackroyd having a cup of tea. The sun filters through the slits in the shutters in a slicing manner. Sitting across from each other at unnatural angles bathed in blood. Rosaline's gun perches between them.

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A Forest Gone Silent

The soft crunch of boots on humus was the only sound Samuel could hear in the forest. He'd explored many valleys, crossed hundreds of streams, and spent more nights under the canopy of trees than he can count, but this was the first time noise was absent. Ahead of him Alfonso shared his unease, the normally high-spirited trapper was mute save for the occasional click of his rifle against his pack. Samuel could only see the back of his head, but he only needed to see the posture and position of his shoulders to know he was alert and scanning the green depths for an answer to his worry.

"There's always birds, I hear them every hunt. It's never been different, why now?" Alfonso muttered under his breath "Where have they gone?"

"The animals remember what we've forgotten," said their guide, Magpie. "They have eyes open to danger that humans closed from contentment."

Magpie was one of many native American guides who offered their services to the party days ago in exchange for a share in the wealth that brought so many people from every end of the state. Alfonso was raised as a cowboy in the frontier of Texas, and Samuel the son of a mason from Philadelphia, yet they were united in their pursuit of the same substance. An elixir made solid that could make even the poorest beggar rich with a single sift of gravel: gold.

The prospecting group established a camp a day's south from where they were now, inside a clearing slashed by a swift river. They numbered 20, including the guides. The need for game sent the three away into the forest to hunt while the others pitched tents, gathered wood, and began to scour the river's edge. So far, the men had found little in the way of deer or moose, only droppings hinting of their presence. The journey started normally for the men, the forest active with the noise of birds and rustles from critters too small to catch. But as they continued the sounds of life faded and in its place a suffocating quiet, as if the forest was holding its breath for something to lash out and shatter the tenuous balance.

For what felt like weeks, they pressed on with ears alert for hooves, and eyes open for any animal patterns in the monotonous gray-green of the surrounding pines. They camped for the night twice, careful to remember their bearings and preparing for the return to camp. Always present was the eternal quiet, the kind that sends shivers on a warm day. They crossed a babbling brook, stopping to refill their canteens, the gurgle of water on the rocks providing relief from their unease, before it too faded into nothingness. On and on the forest seemed to stretch, and Samuel felt that he was a fly on the edge of the pitcher plant, and that with each inch into the maw he would slip to his death.

Waking him out of the endless shuffle through the forest was a shout made by Alfonso, "Over there!" He pointed to what looked like a reddish brown lump amidst the jungle of ferns and shrubs of the forest floor. He diverted from the line they had stuck to the entire trek, quickly but careful to avoid snags from the underbrush. Magpie followed after, the old Arapaho moving with the grace and dexterity of someone half his age. Samuel followed the two awkwardly, his feet struggling against the brush, up a gentle slope to where the men were standing.

The deer curled on the underbrush was dead, its head completely missing from the attack by some predator. The rest of the body however, lay untouched by the murderer. Magpie gently knelt by the corpse, peering at the wound with the severity of a surgeon.

"The wound is fresh, not even a few hours ago." Magpie said with a stoicism that betrayed the moisture in his eyes. Samuel had known Magpie had a deep respect and admiration for living things, and felt immense loss when that life was taken away. He had felt the sorrow radiating from Magpie after numerous hunts, but had never seen tears. Magpie understood that one animal couldn't live without the other's death, but something deeper was bothering him, something that struck at the most tender part of his heart.

"Who could've done this?" Samuel questioned the group "Who kills a deer for nothing but its head?"

"Not who, but what." Spoke Magpie "If it was a human who did this, we would see bullet wounds on the coat."

Magpie explained as he lightly stroked the fur.

"Bears and wolves eat what they kill, we would've come upon a mangled carcass." Alfonso noted as he scanned the treeline. "Do you know an animal in these parts that kills for sport, Magpie?"

Magpie stood up and looked at Alfonso, uncertainty creasing his worn features, "I can't think of an animal in these woods that would do such a thing. What we are dealing with is something I have no knowledge of. We must return to camp quickly, but the hour is growing late."

They continued for another hour, searching for a water source to place their camp. Their movements were skittish, a product of the building fear barraging their spirits. The group decided to carry the headless deer for the return home. Samuel felt his fingers close around the locket on his neck. It had been a gift from his wife that he always reached for when he needed reassurance, and the woods beckoned his hand.

Out of nowhere Samuel suddenly felt movement in the corner of his eyes. With a sudden jerk of the head he saw an arm quickly tuck behind a log deep in the recesses of the trees. It appeared to be human, yet in the quick glimpse Samuel realized how unlikely that was. The arm was pale as milk, a haunting white in the sea of subdued color around it. And its fingers...long and spindly, had curled around a trunk to where the tips almost brushed against its palm.

Samuel reached for his rifle around his back, the other men swinging around to look at him, and then to the direction his gun was pointed. Faint rustling could be heard as whatever it was scurried deeper into the brush.

"Magpie," Samuel said in a voice edged with fear, "I believe that whatever killed that deer is watching us."

Magpie nodded in agreement, "We must set up camp soon. We should be able to scare off any danger with fire and someone awake in the night. Take only what we need and leave the land as we found it."

They stopped at a small pond tucked into the trees, its placid surface like glass, save for the lily pads dotted along the shore. The sun had begun to spiral out of view, and with its slow departure came the mosaic of color of sunset. For a brief moment Samuel felt warmth within the forest, as if the colors of dusk were holding the evil at bay, even if for only the briefest of moments. But the moment was fleeting, and eventually Samuel jogged himself into action as the shadows grew their fingers across the ground.

The men knew that they needed to make haste in time for night, but numerous trips had instilled experience into the trio, and without speaking they began their duties with precision. Alfonso chopped down a nearby tree for firewood, his ax splitting the fir until it groaned its death rattle, falling from the canopy into a heap below. Samuel began a soft whistling tune as he set up the tents, deft hands seamlessly running through the steps with instinct one develops with constant repetition of a task. Meanwhile, Magpie foraged within view of the others for nearby berries and plants, managing to find a clump of raspberries a few yards from where their fire would be.

By the time the men finished, darkness had settled in and the woods faded into the night. Only the tips of branches and leaves were visible through the small fire. The not quite full moon shone its sterile silver light, its crater-riddled face casting its gaze down upon the camp. They ate a small meal, with only the berries Magpie gathered and the water from the pond to add to the dried meat they carried with them at the beginning of the journey.

"We need to sleep in shifts for the night." Magpie said, "We must continue this for a few days until we reach home. The fire will ward off most things in these woods. Use it for protection."

Samuel and Alfonso nodded in understanding. They were unsafe in this place, but to challenge the forest by marching with only the moon to guide them was beyond irrational. The men were scared, but also tired of the events the day brought them. Alfonso stood up from the fire and headed to his tents to sleep, remembering to keep his rifle close at hand. Samuel, exhausted but not yet ready to close his eyes, remained. Magpie only sat and stared into the wispy orange of the campfire. He would be the first to endure the night.

"Samuel." Magpie broke the silence, facing him as he spoke, "for the first time in my many years of life I've felt foreign in my own land. There have been things today I have only ever heard in stories."

Samuel leaned in closer towards Magpie, "What do these stories speak of?"

Magpie sighed, his creased face puzzled in the orange of the fire, "Some forests hold anger towards man, as a forest remembers every tree cut, every animal killed, and every vein of metal stolen from its depths." Magpie flicked his eyes towards Samuel's neck, where his locket glinted slightly.

"The forest can punish men in many ways. A sudden flood or fire, an encounter with a bear, or the labyrinth it creates for a lost traveler. Yet there are darker tales of the Forgotten Ones. Stories told by Arapaho to their children talk of tribes long ago who vanished, consumed by the ancient forests and caves of the land. The tales tell of tribesmen reduced to inhuman creatures as generations lost in the wilderness ate at their minds. The forest bends them to its will, turning the prideful man into nothing more than its loyal servants.

Samuel's hair stood up on end in the back of his neck, his skin cold beneath his coat, "What is the will of the forest?"

Magpie paused for a moment, his forehead wrinkled in contemplation, "The return of all that is taken away, and

man has taken very much.”

Silence hung in the camp as both men sat, only the crinkling of the fire providing sound to the land. Samuel examined his locket, the metal silver in what little light there was. He clicked a small button on the side to open it up, showing a small picture of his wife Sarah. How he wished he could have her with him in this time of distress, but he took solace in that she would always be clasped around his neck, her portrait beside his heart. After what felt like an eternity, Samuel stood up and crawled into his tent, awaiting his shift.

Samuel woke up some time later to Alfonso prodding him awake. He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep, but the moon was higher in its arc across the sky. He guessed enough time had passed for the shifts to change, but Alfonso wasn't supposed to wake him. He looked through the flap of his tent to Magpie rigid beside the fire, eyes anxiously scanning the trees lit faintly by the moonlight.

Alfonso leaned into Samuel's ear and whispered, “There's sounds, footprints by my guess. They're circling just outside the fire.” Alfonso's casual delivery was betrayed by the impatient jittering of his hands along the trigger of his gun, “I'm scared, *hermano*.”

As soon as footsteps were mentioned Samuel could just make out the faint stirring of needles on the ground, the light crunches of feet on twigs muffled with grass. The noises had a rhythm, moving with intention from Samuel's right ear to his left in their arc around the camp.

The men cast their eyes to where the sounds were coming from. They dared not to tread outside the safety of the fire. The fire was their shield, if only temporarily, from the threat only their ears could detect.

Suddenly, the noises ceased. The night grew loud with the sound of silence. The men held their breaths, adrenaline barely contained. Magpie raised his gun to the last location of the sound, shooting a quick glance at the other two. For a moment they all stood, beckoning the forest to deal its next hand.

The tension was broken by quickening steps sprinting their direction, but they came not where they faced. They were to the right, they were to the left, they were behind them, and every direction possible. Magpie had only enough time to give them one last glance, eyes wild with panic and mouth agape, before a pale shadow lurched into the view of the camp, colliding with Magpie. The two crashed onto the fire, snuffing out what remained of the men's shield, as more and more sounds of the creatures rushed into the blinded camp. Samuel, now blinded by the loss of light, had only the sounds of the awakened forest to console him. A loud blast of sound ripped through the night from what Samuel assumed was Alfonso desperately attempting to fight his assailant. The sounds of tearing were harmonized with screaming, human and inhuman, despair and triumph.

The sounds struck at an instinct deep inside of Samuel, the parts of the mind more animal than man, and he chose to flee. Stumbling over half-visible shapes of plants and trees, Samuel retreated away from the cacophony, from the death of his friends, and the monsters that killed them. The sounds behind him told Samuel he was pursued by a number of them. The locket was gripped tightly in his hands, but Samuel couldn't remember when he reached for it. All he could think of was running away from the noise and escaping to the sweet embrace of the silence he rejected all day. The forest had come alive, yet Samuel wished it had stayed dead.

His foot collided into a rock extending from the ground. Samuel was launched into the air before tumbling back onto the ground. He attempted to stand but collapsed back onto the ground. His left foot wouldn't hold his weight, its waves of pain shooting up Samuel's leg. Around him he saw the shapes of his pursuers. Samuel could make out skinny bodies, large heads and hands, and eyes that seemed to glow aflame in the darkness, yet they stood on two legs. Whatever these creatures were, they were human, or used to be. At once the creatures were on top of him, clawing at Samuel, tearing at his clothes and open flesh while he attempted to fight them off. Reaching into his pocket Samuel pulled out his revolver and shot the one closest to him. The sudden burst of gunshot cracked across the woods, and the faint yelp nearby told him he had struck his target.

The sound of the rest of the pack surrounded Samuel, pouncing on his prone body, his attempts of defense futile against the onslaught of bodies. Samuel began to feel his life slipping, eaten away by these pale shadows. In desperation Samuel felt for his locket, his wife always resting beside his heart, but was horrified to find it missing, torn off in the struggle. Frantically Samuel jerked around, looking for his final source of comfort before death. He managed to catch the locket a few yards away, glinting in the moonlight. Ignoring his pain and eventual death Samuel crawled towards it, using his feet to push him. With what little energy he had left he managed to clasp his fingers around the heart-shaped metal before once again the forest faded into silence.

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Concession and Refutation: How Republicans Missed Midterm Voters

On the eve of the 2022 midterms, conservative pundits, politicians, and political analysts all across US media declared that the Republican Party would have an overwhelming victory in the midterm elections, potentially swinging both the house and senate red. They predicted this election as the platform for future success of the Republican Party and the American Right in the federal government. They called this prediction “the red wave”.

There were many indications that the midterms would be a very difficult one for Democrats. A Reuters poll showed that Presidential approval rating fell to 36% in mid-July, in large part due to the surge in inflation under his presidency, which had reached up to 9.1%, the highest it has been since 1981. Factoring into this was the pattern common in the midterm elections, that being “In the 22 midterm elections from 1934 -2018, the President's party has averaged a loss of 28 House seats and four Senate seats.” (presidency.ucsb.edu). Every indication seemed to agree with the prediction of a massive republican victory that would sweep the Democrats out of legislative power and weaken the Biden administration in time for the 2024 presidential election, with Republicans surfing off of the momentum of their red wave.

Despite all the evidence supporting it, the red wave was little more than a trickle. Projections by the Harvard Political Review showed the Republicans gaining house majority at 50.3% with 219 seats, and senate majority with 51 seats. However, while the Republicans did gain the House, they failed to take the Senate, and lost in many critical swing states to democratic candidates. Even Republicans projected to win cleanly in their districts faced surprising opposition from the Democratic candidates, managing to barely hold onto their seats in close elections. Despite all of the evidence pointing to overwhelming victory, the Republicans massively underachieved.

There are many factors that have contributed to the strong resistance pushed by the Democrats, among them the support of young voters. 27% of the election votes were made by Americans under 30, the highest in 3 decades according to The Hill. Chief amongst them were women outraged by the overturning of Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision, a ruling that allowed for the right to have an abortion. It's been a consistent trend since the 60's that women tend to vote more than men, as shown by a UCSB poll. The 2022 midterms are an indication that a growing majority of female and young voters, the new voters most outraged by the abortion verdict, voted blue. This verdict also served to alienate suburban women mothers and other moderates, as the verdict infringed upon the rights of their daughters. The same Brookings poll shows the vote margin for women between ages 30 and 44 was higher in favor of democrats.

The Republicans have underwhelmed despite the golden opportunity this November to gain immense strength in the legislature, and part of the reason for this could be how they've established their positions on hot-button issues like abortion. It is very easy in our current political system dominated by two polarized parties to disregard the middle ground, that something complex like abortion and immigration is summed up in a simple “yea or nay” argument, with little opportunity to find a consensus in between. The Republicans took the stance completely opposing the Democrats, who favored the choice for a woman to abort a fetus, by arguing that abortion is murder, and that it is important that life is put first and foremost regardless of the situation. However, upon further inspection this argument has problems. There are instances, although small, where the fetus can risk the life of the mother, and so the choice for abortion can save the mother's life. By taking a staunch pro-life stance and banning abortion, the Republican Party is forcing the mother to die in childbirth or illegally aborting the baby, which comes with greater risk to the health of the woman. This coupled with the fact mothers may have been the victims of rape or are unable to financially support a child are reasons why so many women want the choice of abortion, and by arguing completely against it the Republicans lost many potential women voters. This strategy of staunch opposition to an argument they grew progressively more disadvantaged on is a likely reason the republicans have already lost the abortion debate.

But there was a strategy that could've worked for an issue such as abortion, and one that can be applied to other

issues, with the potential bonus of bipartisan collaboration. What needs to be understood is that it is okay to concede parts of your argument and strengthen others. The idea of concession in politics can be seen as a sign of weakness in these days of political polarization, but if used correctly it can give you a stronger argument that more people are likely to agree on. Although women want to have the option of abortion, that doesn't mean that they enjoy it. Most women would rather not want to kill the fetus and erase the potential for a successful life, but that due to the lack of reliable alternatives, they feel they don't have much of a choice. To answer this problem the Republicans could have conceded part of their argument, citing medical risks to the mother as the reason to value the choice, and instead publicized a new agenda in funding alternatives for women over abortion. These could come in the form of a more reliable adoption service or increased welfare to households with unwanted pregnancies. This wouldn't eliminate abortions, as there will always be mothers who choose it, but by pushing alternatives can satisfy the Republican hope of discouraging abortion and promoting life as much as possible in a pro-choice America. By conceding the argument that they were losing traction in, and strengthening another that can be highly agreed on by those of both sides, the republicans likely wouldn't have lost support from young Americans, and could've seen an increase in their voting base from people who support their plan to encourage something different from abortion.

With more than half of Republican voters over the age of 50, the need to garner support among young and middle aged voters will only increase as their current base ages. A Gallup poll shows that about 47% of voters between the ages of 18 and 34 identify as "independent" and don't strongly support a party. With encouragement (and a federal holiday on November 8th,) that percentage could decrease, but with the current positions of the Republican party, those voters likely would lean Democrat like many others their age. If the republicans are to have any chance at connecting with young voters, they will need to concede some of their stances on more than just abortion, and propose refined arguments that maintain their party's values while also removing ideas that could discourage younger voters. By doing this they stand a better chance at gaining young and moderate voters that they'll need as their primary base begins to shrink.

Concession is just one strategy that can be used to shift arguments among the public and politicians from which problem is worse, to whether or not a solution can fix a problem. However, to do this requires common agreement over issues, and needs to have support from both ends of the political spectrum. Concession is one of many strategies both parties can use to better connect with the other and to reach a common consensus over issues. This connection is needed in order for the federal government to work, and it can encourage the development of bipartisan solutions that can serve to improve the lives of every American, young and old.

Quinna McCarty
Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Principia School, Saint Louis, MO
Educator: Katie MacDonald

Category: Flash Fiction

Deeper Dimensions

The mouse pauses, eyes running from left to right, nostrils quivering. He scurries forward, paws twitching, each little claw grazing the surface of the earth just hard enough to make an indent. His quaking is barely visible underneath his muddy auburn fur.

But the blood is visible. Once crimson, scarlet wine, it's now the color of brick, the consistency of dirty jelly: a spiderweb of lifeblood remaining from when it bubbled up and over mouse's skin's fissures. Cut out the white noise and the mouse's throbbing heart can be heard but only faintly. Weakly.

Another pause. This time longer, eyes running from left to right to up to down to side to back to front to right. More than just nostrils quivering. Another scurry. Paws jerking. Claws skimming the cold, hard ground not quite hard enough to leave a mark. Not quite hard enough to leave any evidence the mouse has traversed this path - except for the tiny flecks of semi-dried, dirty blood tumbling from the mouse's body to the ground.

The mouse's keen teeth pierce his own tongue. It's drier, brittle than it should be. Its color is less fiery, more apricot than it should be. Another pause. Eyes roll. Nostrils and lungs convulse, unfulfilled. No scurry, just collapse. Claws flail, trying desperately to make a mark, to seize some little speck of dirt and somehow pull himself to a degree of safety and health greater than what could ever be achieved. A squeal escapes. High-pitched and squeaky, it's nothing but a mockery to the grating shriek intended. Heartbeat stalls - no pulse is coming. Eyes glow and quake, blood flooding the vessels almost to the point of bursting. Brittle claws make one last attempt to drag the body somewhere, anywhere, but there's nowhere to go. Not on earth. Finally, one flimsy claw catches on soil, snapping with a sharp almost silent crack as the mouse is catapulted into another dimension.

Head over tail, soul over body the mouse rolls. He quavers - trembles - shudders - convulses - until the strength of the vibration exceeds that of the bond between soul and body and breaks the barrier between life and death. The mangled body falls back through this passage into the third dimension, crashing to the surface of the earth, bouncing once - twice - and the body is still. Eyes wide open but no longer searching. Limbs buckled at unnatural angles. Mouth forever silent.

Soon, the body will be gone. It will decompose and return to the earth's life cycle. A cat will nibble on the body, licking dirty fur and tasting blood, then leave it, uninterested. A fox will examine the body, play with it, carry it a fair distance, then drop it, lending its attention to live prey instead. At this point, the body will be even more disfigured. In two weeks' time, the body will fully disappear, having melted into the earth. But the soul will go on.

The soul will stay, outside of the third dimension, gliding, shining, though it has no apparent source of light. The soul will join billions of souls making one of many, trading pain for peace, feeling only joy after leaving earth behind forever. The soul will stay until the end of time, so completely full of blissful euphoria that the harsh realities of earth cease to exist.

Somewhere far away, in the third time zone of the third dimension, a mouse pauses, unaware of what's coming next. In another dimension, a soul grows bright, preparing to grow in size as it accepts another soul, ready to make one of many yet again.

Mazzie Mcfadden

Age: 17, Grade: 11

Home School, Gardner, KS

Educator: Idean E. Bindel

Category: Poetry

Before

The Fable

The only home I've ever known is the one
Where rustic fables stir the dust
Upon the floor, where feelings
Trapped inside come to unlocking doors
The the music takes me somewhere kind
Leaving all my fears behind
Leaping between the wispy clouds
Soaring music, growing ever loud
I'm flying free, and it will seem
I'm even joyful, actually
But then notes grow quiet, slowly fading
Falling back to the place I was evading
The music will leave me for the winds
To travel the world evermore
Staring at the wall, desolation inside...
I'll be feeling lonelier than ever before
inside.

Hate

No more poems
No more rhymes
Just get to the point
Hate
Anger
Fury
Words burning up your throat
Hands clawing at the world
Shredding it to pieces
Just get to the point
Glaring in anger
Scrawling harsh words
Rage
Growl
Burn
Explosions out of sight
Just bare your teeth and fight
Flames flashing
Words are crashing
Just get to the point
Raging through the fire
Tearing through the ground

Accept the blaze
And feel
Hate.

Lone Wolf

Soft and melodic, a low, frigid note
Melancholy sounds and a deep, starry coat
A song of longing, a wish to be free
As the wolves howl alone; lonely like me.

See The World

Come out of this haunted place
Go see the world, and all its space
Leap into the fields of flowers
Feel the rain that comes in showers
Gaze at the moon as it shines bright and true
Swim in the ocean of deepest blue
Walk under the sky and its bright, shining stars
Seek out the planets from Neptune to Mars
Move with the wind as it sweeps away fears
Fly over mountains that dry your tears
Sink into snow that's whiter than feathers
Soak up the light as it changes through weather
Catch the leaves now as they fall to the ground
Witness the comets that spin round and round
Feel the warm sun as it casts light in this space
Please, come with me, from this dark, haunted place.

Storm

Shadowed windows, deep and dark.
Waiting for lightning, the flickering spark
That thunders from billowing clouds
on dimming evening sky.
Shrouding the distant stars
as the storm reaches up and high.
The elders grumble and groan as they
wait for the storm to go,
Wondering when warmth come
and when the sun will show.
Amid the concern of the people,
a loner watches the darkness rise
With hands pressed to window
and a look of awe in her frightened eyes
As she watches the storm and looks for lightning
the elders had earlier detected,
The sorrow within the storm, she finds,
is her feelings being reflected.

Frances McKee

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

Waning

My cheeks no longer blushed at the thought of her,
Inheriting a rosy tint, that even lamb's blood could never quite match.
That divine yearning for someone, the holy communion of arduous lovers.

Time wore the both of us out, waiting and whistling and working.
Condemning the broken stones that we walk on, and
Cursing those who unconditionally follow us,
Just to pour out our glory to one who pays no mind.

The shoulder brisks and wide eyes I only prayed to for so long,
But I never felt that she answered, never fed me her wisdom.
Angered by her retention of a standstill mystery, I lost the passion that once was.

Mask off, mental filter unleashed, the profile that forever mesmerized, was now just another color amid the colorful world around me.
I began to notice flaws, forgetting the angelic sapphic feeling of locking eyes and suddenly being reborn.

It was hard to love the world we once created, the jokes and the laughs and the metaphors.
It was hard to see her active, to see her mumble affirmations to other women.
It was hard to see her, the straight smile I once admired from every angle.
I was no longer educated on every detail of her life, the mundane memories and memorandums that we celebrated as one.

The synthesis of our judgments was no longer my favorite song.

Frances McKee

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

New

I think it's pleasant to think about how she is around here somewhere.
Across a few streets in her single bedroom apartment,
Singing lullabies and combing through her chestnut hair,
Lodging her ambitions in every drawer and compartment.

I knew she was laughing somewhere.
Perhaps crying to the heavens in somber,
Dreaming of a lust greater than I could give,
Someone worthy of calming her.

Perhaps she was laughing uncontrollably at the text I sent her,
And that's why she couldn't respond.
Or maybe she's out visiting her father's sepulcher,
Unable to ponder much beyond.

She always confuses me, you know.
Some days dwelling on unimportance just to talk to me,
Some days echoing to another to fulfill her golden glow.
She knows that I am rooted within her like a tree,
She knows that she could seriously mess up, and I would never leave.

I am a floral bouquet,
Infused with all of the colors of our time.
But I shrivel and get thrown out in two days,
Only to be replaced and left behind.

She is a maiden in her fairytale,
With pebbles for eyes, and her precense so fair.
Her eyes squash blossoms, and her skin purple-y pale,
And it's difficult to fathom that she is around here, laughing and locking eyes, somewhere.

Frances McKee

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

Full

My back-turned beloved,
Head faced parallel to mine.
Pixie chopped chestnut hair,
Skin fair,
Hips and back aligned.

Dainty Darling,
Wanders beyond my eyesight.
Visually crawling,
Unintentional bonding,
Preliminary percussion of plight.

Rhythmic understandings,
She turns and looks my way.
Gracious glare,
Of mystery and care,
Closet my loss of faith.

I'll adorn her life,
Dip her into a kiln pool of gold,
See her for what she wants to be.

Her facial asking for reassurance,
The reason I go to work each day,
To satisfy her security,
To satisfy my disdain.

She the rector of my imagination,
Gone with gauche gashes of sensation.
Sensate my blood,
To smell her all of the time.

Captivate my corridors of consciousness,
Alert the councils and canines.
Let them sniff me out as a part of her,
Let's commit every crime.

I'll hold her hand at the intersection of love and indifference,
True opposites in this world of jealous, yet silent mimes.
I'm hurt by her ignorance, hence
My hate shouted at the divine.

I'll fight forever,

Or until she is only a victim,
Of my regretfulness.

Frances McKee

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

Waxing

I wanted to ask for her hand in marriage,
But I told her I liked her overalls.
She thanked me kindly, and I walked away.
I slammed my head into the wall.

I wanted to invite her to my Halloween party,
I picked up the fork that she dropped behind her instead.
A month passed, my romance had not bled.

I squeezed her as hard as I could.
I juiced her like a lemon,
And suddenly we were swimming together in a pitcher,
And she smiled at me through the yellow fog.

We held hands in secrecy,
God knows I can't be trusted with intellectual intimacy.
I traced my fingers along her jaw.

She had a bad day,
And I misjudged her moments of silence as disinterest.
I unplugged my love machine,
I put our quick glances to rest.

Winter froze our fingertips,
We held hands but never quite touched.
The distance proved it was all only lust.

Life continued its work.
Inertia cycled us to Christmas,
Where we sat to face each other at the table,
"You make me superstitious."

We tumbled out of that restaurant,
High off of the pearls in each other's eyes.
Nothing kept me full like her contagious cries.

I thought we were onto something,
But it seemed that the case had gone cold once more.
The Spring came,
But my hands were just as purple as before.

My charm only lasted half the night,
And I watched her move on.

She convinced me that my charm was long gone.

I should have known my leash was being chewed through,
Turns out the fire was only below the ground.
My love was let loose,
And I was called crazy by our entire town.

Apparently I was alone in the investigation,
That whole time I had been fooling myself.
I could have sworn it was real, that thing I felt.

Frances McKee

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

Crescented

I'm never sure whether to just say it or to keep walking.
I want her to feel my passion from a ruler's distance,
So that neither of us can reach each other where it hurts.

I hover overtop of the "drop everything and just say it" button,
But my hands rest on the magnet's repeling force.
I feel that I am running out of chances.

My whole world has been uprooted since I saw her figure,
And the last thing I want is for my roots to be laid out on a table,
And dissected by hands hidden behind rubber gloves.

The second someone discovers my truth,
Soon they'll be cradling my newborn,
And I don't want my heart to be tussled with.

When the predators don't know you're a target,
They won't bother bringing their bats to the functions.
But my secret could win them a grand slam.

How can I be sure that speaking is not suicide?
I do not know what the waters would do to me.
It's probable that they would tear me apart,
But to speak is the only way to be free.

Frances McKee

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: St Teresa's Academy, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Kelly McKee

Category: Poetry

Eclipsed

I've grown up the same way you have.
I've witnessed plight in a great grimace night.
I've felt that heroic might while landing the flight.
I've scattered myself throughout my properties,
Claiming wisdom regarding your worldly entities.
I want to be you,
Letting my bravery shine through.
Never keeping a secret,
In order to witness the sky's blue,
Whenever you want to.
You get to be innocent,
You get to make sense with your relations and your implications.
I can't be you without being disingenuous,
But I can't be me without being everlastingly poisonous.

Disparity, such a sound device of explanation.
Succumbing to a single term, to judge entirely my location, casted as awry, reeled in as a total abomination.
But it's true, as simple as that.
I feel no hope, no life loving sap.
Each day that goes by, another reason to die.
Calamitous cries, maternal tired eyes.
You could save me, no you could save me, no, you could save me! I exclaim!
But from me to you, and you to the rest,
I cannot keep wearing out my own name.

Amongst the vast display of verdure, I mete myself and weep.
Allergic to congregation, I cannot stray from home often,
And when I do, I must have a routine to avenue.
I thought invariably that humanity was the trouble, but upon resting in the meadows, I heard the grass whisper in couples.
They disclosed my deepest failures, the scars I failed to hide, but when I yelled out to confront them,
They all swayed and danced with pride.
Shamed for hiding underneath my covers to avoid their inanity, but shamed for going out and letting them exercise their vanity.
I was never made to be human, to bare their harsh demeanor, I can only bluff so much enthusiasm, can only tolerate so much "The grass is always greener..."

Consciously courageous, forcing out the steam.
The pot boils over, and I see a monster in the reflection of the television screen.
They call me wild, they call me savage,
But when I'm cordial, when I'm patient, I'm unimportantly average.
I want to be a part of all that I see,
I want to feel the way the leaves change to orange and then back to green.

I want to see an angel in the reflection of the television screen,
And I want to program my expressions to silence the internal scream.

She who is quiet, and she who is hollow.

They meet in the interrogation room with the "chosens" of Apollo.

They say two mustn't relate, they say two mustn't inflate,

Two must match the rhythm of the crowds, and finish the meal presented on their plate.

Two must follow the rules, the principles in place, to terminate the fools, and label difference a disgrace.

The "chosens" define the rulings as only a system of fate,

And they use Apollo's fame to make way for their hate.

Katie Murphy

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Local Climate Change

INTRODUCTION:

The football field was swarming with Frisbee players in the 72 degrees Fahrenheit sun on Nov. 10. Three days later, the turf was frosty at 19 degrees with flurries.

A tornado nearly wrecked homes in Prairie Village on June 8, just a few streets away from city limits. The intersection of Mission Road and 68th Street was four feet deep underwater during heavy flooding in May. This past summer was one of the driest in Kansas history, according to the National Weather Service. The Farmers' Almanac already predicted a colder-than-average winter for eastern Kansas.

As temperatures swing and weather events bounce to extremes in Prairie Village, residents feel the impact of climate change — propelling local groups to combat the issue.

Regional Environmental Protection Agency senior climate advisor Andrew Wynne defines climate change as “the significant changes in average conditions like temperature, precipitation and wind that occur over a long period of time.” In the Midwest, that means increasing temperatures, stronger storms and more flooding events and droughts that affect agriculture.

“In Prairie Village, there’s similar changes that we’re seeing throughout the Midwest,” Wynne said. “Like the really intense flooding that took place along the Missouri River back in the spring of 2019 and the storm in St. Louis just a couple of months ago with six or 10 inches of rain. Then there’s regional temperature changes.”

The past few years have been some of the warmest on record for Kansas, comparable to the extreme heat of the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, according to the National Center for Environmental Information. This follows the global trend, as eight of the 10 warmest recorded years on Earth have occurred since 1998, according to the EPA. Wynne reports that this past October was the fourth warmest October globally on record.

“There’s variability,” Wynne said. “It’s not a straight, upward climb since temperatures do go up and down, but the trend is overall increasing over long periods of time.”

Since 1990, Kansas has experienced a below-average number of nights with a maximum temperature of zero degrees Fahrenheit, according to the NCEI. The freeze-free season has lengthened, especially in eastern Kansas — including Prairie Village — averaging about nine days longer than the 20th century average.

“The shifts in the trends and the climate changes that we are seeing have natural causes, but there’s also human causes like the burning of fossil fuels,” Wynne said.

The frequency of extreme storms has also increased since 2015 as the average number of two-inch rainfall days has increased from 1.5 to 2.1 per year. Especially during transition seasons like fall, weather patterns are turning more abnormal, according to Wynne.

Students have noticed. In an Instagram poll of 225 students, 87% are worried about climate change.

“The continuation of trends becoming more extreme is really dependent upon the adaptation and mitigation practices that we're putting in place in each community, like in Prairie Village,” Wynne said. “We need to be thinking holistically about the solutions to curb that and ultimately bring temperatures back down.”

Local groups like the PV Environmental Committee, Public Works, Climate Action KC, Building Energy Exchange KC and East’s own Environmental Club are trying to neutralize climate change in Kansas. Wynne cites social and health benefits as well as economic benefits like financial incentives from tax cuts and job creations in new industries addressing climate change.

“We can’t just cut our emissions or just reduce waste or just reduce water or energy use,” Wynne said. “It’s ultimately a multi-pronged approach that requires lots of different folks developing groups and partnerships.”

PUBLIC WORKS BUILDING:

There’s only one LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — platinum-certified building in Prairie Village: the Public Works facility which opened in September. Facility director Keith Bredehoeft hopes the certification will set an example for future buildings.

“It’s hard to make that jump to platinum level due to extra costs,” Bredehoeft said. “But our city council prioritized and showed how important fighting climate change is, which people can learn from.”

LEED is the most widely used green building rating system nationwide, where a project earns points by addressing carbon, energy, water, waste, transportation and health environmental quality. The facility features solar panels to reduce carbon emissions, a rain garden to conserve water, an efficient heating and cooling system and electric vehicles, which all contributed to the platinum certification — the highest level of points.

SMSD has begun to utilize LEED in its buildings as well, with the Center for Academic Achievement receiving a silver certification, but East is not currently certified by LEED. Local contractor Ashley Sadowski believes that environmental designing under LEED certifications is the future of not only commercial renovations but construction at school too.

The extra building costs for public works were possible with support from the city council and detailed planning in advance to stay under budget, according to Bredehoeft. Details down to bike racks and an electric vehicle charging station are available for public use alongside native vegetation strategically planted around the facility to reduce water usage.

Bredehoeft hopes that the certification and sustainability of the facility will inspire renovating homeowners and businesses in Prairie Village to strive for eco-friendliness as the features of the building are simple to replicate. It’s already impacting the blueprints for city hall.

“The success of the new public works building is going to influence what we're [going to do] with city hall as the city council begins the process to redesign or potentially rebuild,” Environmental Committee and city councilman Greg Shelton said.

PRAIRIE VILLAGE ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE:

The Prairie Village Environmental Committee, led by city councilwoman Piper Reimer, plans local climate change initiatives by taking into account resident feedback and climate reports from business and infrastructure media sources like Bloomberg and S&P Global.

“What makes our city unique is that we are really being proactive and progressive in trying to address climate change,” Reimer said. “Twenty-five years ago, Prairie Village put a curbside recycling program in place as one of the first cities in the state to do something like that. Since then, we’ve been committed to sustainability.”

Their current programs include a new \$16,000 mattress recycling program to reduce city waste launched this April and planting native plants in traffic islands that require less water and are habitats for monarch butterflies.

“Reducing water usage and keeping waste out of landfills lessens the production of methane, a greenhouse gas that significantly worsens climate change,” Wynne said.

The committee also hosted a Go Green 2022 Fair in September where residents could speak to representatives from Kansas climate action organizations about sustainability related products and programs. Plus, it created a city website listing the quantity and type of chemicals being used on city property that is updated monthly to inform residents about potential toxins that are vaporizing and easier to inhale due to higher temperatures.

“We want to provide chemical information to residents so that they can make choices about which parks they're visiting at which time while knowing the potential of what chemicals they might be exposed to,” Reimer said.

The committee was a key advocate for the installation of the four electric vehicle charging stations in Prairie Village and the entrance into Evergy's multi-year agreement between midwestern cities to construct a new wind farm to provide clean energy for the region — the first city in Kansas to commit. The wind farm began services in 2021.

“Four years ago, local interest in energy technology like wind power was pretty thin,” Shelton said. “In the last two years, we've seen much more community interest in clean energy with more institutional investors like JP Morgan and BlackRock helping out.”

City building codes are also influenced by the committee, which advocates for the use of more permeable materials for driveways, patios and sidewalks — reducing the risk of flooding due to temperature changes — and the construction of rain gardens to conserve water.

A few projects have already been approved for next year. The committee is funding a project at Mission Road and 68th Street to address an increase in flooding issues this spring. They also worked with the mayor and city council to allocate \$50,000 of the 2023 city budget to hire a part-time sustainable program management contractor and are searching for a recruit now.

“Overland Park has a full-time sustainability manager, but their city is five times larger than ours,” Reimer said. “It is incredibly unique that a city our size is investing in a sustainability coordinator. I hope that we inspire other small cities to get involved as well.”

The agenda also includes funding Public Works' flooding project on Mission Road and starting a curbside composting program.

“In 2020, we did a composting pilot program, and people really liked it,” Reimer said. “Unfortunately it ended right when COVID started and we didn't feel that it would be a fiscally responsible decision to be investing more money in a new program. But we're looking to bring composting back soon.”

Though 89% of students in an Instagram poll of 202 have never heard of the Prairie Village Environmental Committee, Reimer hopes to spread awareness about the committee and climate change to all ages in Prairie Village by continuing to implement new programs. Especially since entering the Race to Zero agreement between cities internationally to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2040 or sooner.

“As a resident before becoming a city council member, I was oblivious to what was going on behind the scenes,” Reimer said. “I just knew that my trash was getting picked up, the snow was being removed and my street was in great shape — which is fine for normal affairs. But climate change calls for residents to engage with the city and change their behaviors in a way that positively impacts our community.”

BUILDING ENERGY EXCHANGE:

Building Energy Exchange KC aims to help Kansas City achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Executive Director Ashley Sadowski uses architecture to solve the most pressing climate change threat to northeastern Kansas in her opinion — heat.

“Extreme weather days where folks living particularly in urban areas without green space are going to just heat up extensively, which can lead to negative health effects,” Sadowski said. “Architecture seems like a far removed solution to climate change, but 63% of our regional greenhouse gas emissions come from buildings. So architecture

and design makes a huge difference.”

The organization focuses on installing windows with more airtight sealing, higher-grade insulation and solar panels in buildings around Kansas City. Since opening this spring, they have worked with one cohort of contractors that will “graduate” from the eight-month sustainability training program in December. Sadowski believes that most private contractors lack adequate training to install green technologies, so her goal is to train more environmentally-conscious contractors in the area. Two additional cohorts are set to graduate next year.

“We’re not trying to build whole new buildings from scratch,” Sadowski said. “It’s making small changes in existing buildings to move towards higher energy efficiency, which is a specialized field that not a lot of people are in. The technologies have already been invented, we just need more people to implement them.”

Recognizing the potential job opportunities in the contractor field, the organization strives to provide training and provide local mentors to diverse businesses in the construction industry.

The organization’s biggest obstacle is building owners’ hesitance to make hefty investments in green renovations, according to Sadowski. However, she is confident that any eco-friendly updates will easily pay for themselves in 10 years and believes that investment markets are changing dramatically for the better this year, citing the Inflation Reduction Act.

“The exciting thing is that banks and investors are starting to look at environmentally conscious investing,” Sadowski said. “They’re more likely to give businesses very low-cost money at the beginning to do these improvements, knowing that you can pay those off over time in a very reliable way.”

Another reason for building owners to be cautious of climate change is the “brown discount” — where properties are considered not as valuable if they haven’t achieved new levels of energy efficiency or access to solar power.

In the coming months, Building Energy Exchange KC is starting an additional program to teach homeowners about energy audits to help them become more aware of their carbon footprint — potentially motivating them to renovate. In April, they are hosting a climate summit for local students to discuss more possible solutions to climate change.

“I practiced architecture for a number of years in the private sector, but this work is more fulfilling,” Sadowski said. “I’d recommend for students who want to be on the forefront of fighting climate change to look into it for sure.”

ENVIRONMENTAL CLUB:

Environmental Club brings the fight against climate change to East. Started this fall by freshmen Ishaan Home and Shubra Durgavathi, the club’s goal is to decrease the school’s environmental footprint.

“At East, everyone is aware of climate change,” Home said. “We’re blessed to be economically advantaged which shields some effects of climate change, so there can be a lack of urgency and care for the environment.”

Home and Durgavathi are working to reactivate dormant solar panels by contacting administration and decrease food waste at school by running awareness campaigns inspired by seeing trash cans overflowing in the cafeteria each day — both things that would reduce net emissions, according to Wynne.

“There’s an overabundance of waste and consuming a high concentration of products,” Home said. “People buy too much, people spend too much and people get too much and end up throwing some of it away.”

On top of reducing waste, they’d also like to see the district transition to all electric vehicles, including school buses.

Before starting the club, Home and Durgavathi created a petition at Indian Hills Middle School with 86 signatures to pressure administration to reduce paper waste within the school — and are still emailing administrators to follow up on the issue today.

“Looking at how many people are at IHMS, 86 isn’t that big of a number,” Durgavathi said. “But we were just a handful of eighth graders who managed to get a lot of people to think about the environment again and try to help it, even if it was just in a little way.”

The club meets after school in Room 301 or 300A on Wednesdays and invites students to come to learn more about sustainability at school. There are currently 20 members — mostly freshmen and seniors.

“Some of my friends and family don’t care about climate change as much as I do, so I think it’s important to get involved with the club and spread awareness about the issue,” club member freshman Charlie Grey said.

In the coming weeks, Home and Durgavathi plan on producing club T-shirts in a sustainable way — asking members to bring in old shirts to be repurposed and decorated.

Club sponsor and environmental education teacher Rusty DeBey promotes climate awareness through his work with the club along with teaching about the science of climate change in his classes.

“We’re not here to tell people how to live their lives,” DeBey said. “Our job is to make people aware of what’s happening with the environment so that they can make educated decisions themselves.”

FUTURE SOLUTIONS:

The U.S. Department of Energy recently announced more than \$80 million of grants, the first of a \$500 million promised investment, to make clean energy improvements in public schools. Funds will be awarded to school districts to make upgrades to lower energy costs and improve student learning environments on an application basis.

“It’s important to have people like students, staff and parents telling their school that climate change action is a priority and that they want to see their school move to net zero,” Sadowski said. “Talk to schools about taking advantage of these federal grant opportunities.”

Though Building Energy Exchange KC hasn’t worked with schools specifically yet, Sadowski believes that students should advocate for the Shawnee Mission School District to apply for a grant by the application deadline on March 6 to reduce emissions at East similarly to how the nonprofit would. Wynne recommends that East takes advantage of the environmental grants as well, though associate principal Dr. Susan Leonard hasn’t heard of any plans at the school level.

“Sometimes the district needs ideas, and I know grants are stronger when they have community support,” Leonard said. “If we have a group of students saying, ‘We heard about this and think our district should invest in this,’ then I think it’s something that’d be a potential for sure. Our building is old and not necessarily the most efficient.”

Students wanting to get involved against climate change in other ways can join the Environmental Club or contact the organizations mentioned. Wynne’s advice about mitigating and adapting to climate change in Prairie Village is to be holistic.

“It takes efforts from many different groups and people to fight climate change, and us highschoolers have an important role to play,” Durgavathi said.

Katie Murphy

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Tennis State Champions

Four state championship trophies sat heavy and lifeless on a side table while seniors Bryson Langford and Greta Stechshulte shared their final hug as official lancer teammates at their end-of-season banquet.

The only pair in Kansas history to win four state doubles titles sat in the very front row of the packed Meadowbrook banquet room, having earned their spot with an impressive 95-0 undefeated record against Kansas teams.

The dinner was their chance to celebrate 110 out of 114 doubles matches won overall and bask in their newfound, historical glory. Instead, Bryson and Greta were mesmerized by snapshots of themselves eating Slim Jims and Andy's ice cream on past road trips to tournaments.

A photo slideshow recapping their seasons played on-screen.

They stifled laughs at images of their goofy poses in the team van. "Awww"-ed at their dorky grins in a throwback of their first doubles win as nine-year-olds. Shared knowing smiles at pictures of them post-win over their rivals.

"It made me remember a lot of the things I've experienced with Bryson," Greta said. "Tennis is really important to me, but I try not to cry in front of people."

Only the players in the front row could notice Greta's eyes, that she'd managed to keep dry all season, water as Bryson said she "meant so much" to her during her senior speech.

Behind the unbeatable state champs stands their full story of success and lesser-known — but equally important — moments.

FRESHMAN SEASON

Sept. 4, 2019 | Pembroke Hill Dual Then-freshman Greta's first high school tennis singles opponent — her older sister's best friend — laughed when Greta hit another winner to clinch match point. There was something comedic about getting crushed by someone four years younger wearing an unofficial plain white tank top. Though her actual uniform was still coming in the mail, Greta won 8-0.

She got a rush from the win, but singles matches were lonely. Plus, she and Bryson had played club tennis doubles tournaments on and off the past seven years — placing first at a Nebraska doubles tournament right before the season. East tennis coach Andrew Gibbs knew a good pair when he saw one. So soon enough, Greta and Bryson played less singles and more doubles.

Sept. 11, 2019 | Pembroke Hill Tournament After clutching all five doubles matches of their season so far, Rock Bridge from Missouri showed Bryson and Greta their first loss.

Both felt they could've won. They *should've* won. Except their court positioning wasn't in sync and their opponents out-rallied them.

But their disappointment was quelled when Bryson's crush showed up to watch their following match, motivating Bryson to hit the ball twice as hard as normal, according to Greta. Her "normal" speed was already enough to make Bryson infamous at her off-season club for her whiplash balls. Now, she was hitting it f-a-s-t. Balls whizzed past the other team before they could touch them and smacked the wind screens, some embedding into the fence.

"Bryson had never hit the ball that hard before," Greta said.

Greta decided that Bryson's love interests should come watch their matches more often.

Oct. 3, 2019 | Sunflower LeagueGreta and Bryson's opponent and teammate Quinci Cartmel *headed* to pee. Bad. It was the first thing she said on court of the Sunflower League semifinals. Still, she wanted to wait until after the match — she assumed it'd be over soon.

Then, mid-match, Quinci's partner floated a high ball right into Bryson's reach at the net — a rookie mistake when facing the dominant duo. Bryson's eyes lit up as she swung with all her body weight for a direct hit on Quinci's back (which was turned around in panic).

"I think I just peed," Quinci said.

Winning the biggest tournament of the regular season prompted nothing more than another signature high five for the duo — they've never been the gushing, public celebration type.

Oct. 19, 2019 | State TournamentCoach Gibbs only worried about one team at state — East's long-time rivals, the Blue Valley North Mustangs. A few minutes away from Topeka, Gibbs eased on the breaks of the team van as he passed an elegant, newly-built hotel with BVN's van — decked out with navy blue window markers — parked in front. Bryson paused on her math homework to glance at Greta, who was squashed next to her between coolers and tennis gear. Her wide eyes asked: *Are we really staying at the same hotel as the Mustangs?*

But Gibbs kept driving, past the decked-out van, past the renovated hotel and straight to the next eyebrow-raising inn with a weed-infested, cracked parking lot and paint-chipped exterior.

Bryson slept for only four hours between the scratchy covers and mysterious odor in her and Greta's room. The soon-to-be state champion awoke by rolling out of bed onto the hard floor, startled by "Defying Gravity" blasting from Greta's alarm — a ruder awakening than Bryson's soothing instrumentals.

After only losing six games out of 42 in a total of three matches, the duo made it to the finals against BVN. The state title was stirringly close. Greta's grandma was so excited that she hobbled onto center court as the match began, only for a red-faced Greta to shoo her off. Other teams' coaches stopped watching their own players to see the freshman wonders take a shot at the state title, joining parents and teammates crowding the fence around the court.

"I like playing in front of people, but we could sense the tension," Bryson said. "It was probably the biggest crowd we've ever played in front of."

Game score: 2-1. Then 3-2. Then 5-4. On serve. They barely won the first set, 6-4.

One of their opponents, a lefty, had a wicked cross-court forehand. Bryson and Greta struggled to knock her off balance or push her far enough off the baseline, barely stringing together enough games to earn a matchpoint.

Jelly legs and shaking hands aside, Bryson hit a pounding return — forcing their opponents to miss. For the first time all season, she sprinted and nearly tackled Greta with a monster hug. Greta's arms stayed glued to her sides, shocked by the affectionate display more than the win.

With a 6-4, 6-4 victory and their only hug all season, Bryson and Greta secured their first state title to cheers that Greta would later call "electric."

SOPHOMORE SEASON

Oct. 17, 2020 | State Tournament It had been an undefeated season so far for then-sophomores Greta and Bryson. Enter then-freshmen and East doubles team Abigail Long and Katie Schmidt.

Bryson and Greta's newest competition faced them in the finals of the state tournament while 30-mph winds sporadically whipped the ball around the court.

Wind — what some tennis coaches call the ultimate equalizer. For unfavored teams, it can be a chance to overtake shaken opponents. Though Greta and Bryson had beaten their teammates in the Sunflower League finals earlier that season and weekly at practice, gusts had already caused upsets in the singles draw of the state tournament that day. Nothing felt guaranteed.

Greta and Bryson exchanged knowing glances. It'd be an ugly match. In hindsight, they can't recall a single clean point without at least one shanked ball shooting off in an unplanned direction. All four players suffered from the wind, but the match still wasn't close.

A 6-0, 6-0 win for Greta and Bryson brought less cheers than last year — they weren't the baby underdogs anymore.

JUNIOR SEASON

Sept. 15, 2021 | Harmon Park Quad Then-juniors Greta and Bryson's friends were shocked to hear that they'd lost a match that night.

Barstow's dynamic sister doubles team kept the game close on serve at first. Greta and Bryson had played them in outside tournaments and knew the match would be a battle beforehand, but the East team had home-field advantage at Harmon Park. Plus, Bryson and Greta were always dead set on winning. Nothing could sway their focus.

That is, until blood-curdling screams rang throughout the park. A car had just hit a brown dog on the street adjacent to the courts. Greta's dad — a surgeon — ran from the courts to help, but it was too late.

"After we started playing again, we couldn't hit a ball the same while thinking about the screams and dog that had literally just gotten run over," Bryson said.

They lost 10-6 in a tiebreaker.

SENIOR SEASON

Sept. 17, 2022 | St. Joseph's Academy *Don't turn away. Don't back up. I can hit it back* senior Bryson thought.

She knew her coaches would tell her to hold her ground against St. Joseph's top doubles team. So, despite her instinct to retreat, she crouched in the middle of the service box and watched her opponent reel her racquet back for an overhead smash.

Spoiler: Bryson could, in fact, *not* hit it back.

Instead, the over 80 mph ball careened directly into Bryson's chest, bowling her onto the ground where she laid with the wind knocked out of her for at least 30 seconds.

"I thought my doubles partner had died," Greta said.

As Greta helped her partner up, Bryson's mom whispered to Greta's that the St. Joseph girls had "no idea what

they'd just unleashed." They'd seen Greta and Bryson get revenge before — a side quest on the way to winning.

Bryson pegged the girl who hit her with a punching volley and Greta got the other one with a fuzzy yellow bullet before winning the match 6-3, 6-0.

"If someone goes after my partner, I'm not going to necessarily avoid hitting them back," Greta said.

Sept. 29, 2022 | Sunflower LeagueGreta and Bryson were happy. Yes, they'd just won their match against Lawrence Free State 8-1 — but more importantly, they'd gotten to use a fancy score-recording remote that displayed their game progress on the official scoreboard for the crowd for the second time ever.

As they geeked out over punching their own score into the device, Gibbs walked on court and took the pair's used balls. They shot each other confused looks.

"I'm going to keep these for the banquet," he said. "Congratulations on your 100th career win."

The feat is something only one or two seniors accomplish every few years.

"We would've played better if we had known it was our 100th match beforehand," Bryson said. "So it wasn't that exciting."

Oct. 15, 2022 | State TournamentAnd so they met again. Katie and Abigail versus Greta and Bryson, part three. An oddly calm wave passed through both seniors who felt a win coming. The hunch carried them confidently through the entire match, up until match point. Being up a set, five games and 40-0 meant one point away from being in history books — and everything they'd played for since freshman year.

40-15. *That's okay, just one more point.*40-30. *We can't keep letting this slip.*Deuce.

Uh oh.

The three-time state champs were just two points away from making history. Greta hits a volley smash winner. Advantage for her and Bryson. Two hearts pounded — one point away. But Katie hit a whooping first serve in the wide corner of the box to make it deuce again.

Another point lost. Sighs of frustration for the seniors. Ad out. Bryson hits a passing shot. They were expected to win — they'd spent four years waiting for this moment. *Don't think about the stakes.* Back to deuce.

Eight deuces later, Bryson and Greta win a two-point streak to close out the match and become the first doubles team in Kansas history to win four titles. Viewers politely clapped, but most had seen the win coming for the veterans.

Striding off-court, Greta and Bryson hugged everyone in their path: their parents, teammates, coaches. The Kansas Athletic Association reporter ushered them away for an interview. They held up fours for photos and said countless thank yous.

After four years of three-hour practices seven times a week to train for the win, the pair got what they'd wanted most: a historical four-peat. Strangely, the memories along the way — whether silly, celebratory or bittersweet — seemed just as significant as their gleaming trophy.

Instead of a racquet, Greta's hand grasped an imaginary microphone as she belted Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood on the van ride back from state with her five fellow state champions.

It was impossible to be in a bad mood shoved between teammates, tennis bags and a state championship trophy for those three hours home. Even Gibbs cracked a smile from the driver's seat at the off-pitch and sometimes made-up lyrics that the girls were "harmonizing."

Relief after spending two days under pressure to win made the normally-calm group of girls giddy in their seats. Relief after four years of stress for Bryson and Greta. They'd *finally* done it.

When “Long Live” by Taylor Swift came on, Bryson didn't know the lyrics — so Greta carried that song.

“Long live all the mountains we moved!” she shouted and danced, pointing at Bryson. “I had the time of my lifeeeeee fighting dragons with you!”

Bryson's eyes watered at the thought of every practice, match, loss and win they'd had together. She was supposed to be happy, and she was. But she couldn't stop wondering what playing D1 tennis at Davidson University next year would be like without her doubles partner, impromptu-karaoke-duet buddy and close friend since third grade.

Greta kept dancing. But Bryson knew her teammate well enough to understand that the distant look on Greta's face meant she was thinking the same thing.

Kathryn Myers

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Flash Fiction

Patchwork

The young boy watches as his grandmother pulls the spring onions from the ground, her sleeves billowing through the woven mists. It is breakfast time and the sun is rising over the hill, brushing the tops of each tree. The moon, made of honey, is still lingering in the sky. The mist is thick around the boy's ankles and his eyes hang heavy from his slumber. He wanders from his grandmother to his stomach, growling lightly, reminding him of the eggs and toast that await him. The old woman stands up straight, turns to the East, and pinches her eyes to glare at the sun.

"It'll be a good day for stitching," she calls to her grandson and walks towards the house.

As she treads through the oak door, he runs past her. His feet patter to the kitchen as he sits on his favorite chair, the one across from the sink with the tall round back he loved to slip his hands through. His grandma came in shortly after, placing the onions on the counter. She gathers the butter, the eggs, the bread. *Click. Click. Click.* The stove putters and a flame ignites below her pan. She chops the onion, slices the butter, and cracks two eggs in the pan with a sizzle—one for each of them. They sit at their favorite chairs and take a sip of tea after each bite of toast for good luck.

After their breakfast, the pair pulled their woolen feet across the hardwood to the great room surrounded by cedar boughs. The grandmother propped open a window, just enough for the two of them to hear the air through the trees and pull their shirts closer to their bodies from the breeze. The table in the center of the room bore the weight of a quilt in reds and purples, coming into patchwork. At the sight of it, she took her seat at the table, slipping a thimble onto her finger. The boy took his place in front of a stack of cut fabric, ready to help her. He passed her a strip of cloth and she sewed. He sat attentively, with a finger on a piece of cloth, ready to place it in her hand when she finished attaching the previous one.

"Back and forth, back and forth," she whispered as her needle glided through the quilt.

"Up and down, up and down," the boy responded in rhythm.

They continued their measured process. Piece after piece of cloth is patched into a likeness of something not yet known to the boy. The two often spent their days together like this, hunching their backs over the table, only stopping for a sip from their teacup or to stretch their cramping fingers. To the boy, it seemed that it would be one hundred years before the quilt was completed, that he would be an old man with knobby knees and he would still spend his days with a needle in hand. On this day, with its misty morning and its moon made of honey, the boy felt his legs itch in his corduroys and his fingers cramping on the cotton.

"When I'm your age, will I still be here?" The boy asked with his voice wavering.

"What do you mean?" The woman replied with a chuckle.

"On days like this—when the weather is nice and the air flows through the trees— will I still have to sit here and stitch *all day*?"

His grandmother breathed through her nose.

"All you do, all day long is sew. Why? Why? Why? Why do you cramp your fingers on a quilt that won't be finished for a million years!"

The woman replied, smiling, "It will be finished one day, and that is enough for me."

Lexi Newsom

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Maria Worthington

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Graduation Day

There was a soft crunch of leaves beneath her feet as Lena stepped a waltz—one, two, three, one, two, three—forward into the mist.

It was overcast above, threatening to rain, the heavens disappointed and closed off, and the girl knew that it was because of her. The heavens always liked a good show.

Breathe she whispered. Let the letters soak into her blood and ease the tension in her muscles, in her fists—tightly clenched, a clock, a bomb—and Lena had to remind herself, over and over, that the word belonged to the dead leaves beneath her feet and not to the heavens above or to her steps taken to the constant, dancing rhythm: one, two, three, one, two, three. *Breathe*, she thought, lips closed so the mist wouldn't hear.

The girl took her now-open palms and shaped them around the black curves of her camera, raised the lens. She twisted the focus onto a leaf below, its four veins a brilliant red against the grey decay all around them.

A soft click. Lena smiled.

There came a soft rumble of thunder from a mile away, maybe a half mile (probably a half), and she sighed.

“Ok,” she whispered to the sky, trying to see beyond the electronic pixels, beyond the broadcast recorders, beyond the screens to the Review Panel and their grading sheets.

It was Graduation Day.

None of the girls who had passed through the Conformatorium had ever failed their final evaluation—the school's most effective marketing point. She almost wondered what it'd be like to be the first, to step twice instead of thrice, out of line ... Would she be a hero, a martyr? Or left behind in the dust of the soulful and long-forgotten?

Breathe Lena thought once more, relaxing her fingers on the camera as she lifted it to snap a photo of the trees and their pink blossoms, heart-shaped, conventionally pretty.

They were the school's mascot, its inspiration, its goal: shaping 'Merica's future mothers into pretty, dainty flowers.

They made Lena vomit in her mouth.

They brought back the memory of the Second Evaluation, the heavy smell of blood and metal, the palpable feeling of fear, the sight of empty eyes and bodies labeled “ugly” by bullet holes strewn around the perfect petals, still standing, still holding in their tears. Conventionally pretty. This was what the heavens liked: fragile, composed, heart-shaped blossoms decorating 'Merica's strong and growing trees.

The thunder stopped; maybe whoever they had sent could sell these flower photos. Maybe the Review Panel was happy. She closed her eyes, opened the camera menu, scrolled to the photo of red veins. The mist thickened, and the girl knew her audience was tense, sitting on the edge of their seats. The girl forced herself to keep her eyes closed as the mist solidified into a hand, guided hers to click the small black button in the bottom corner; the girl

refused to look at the screen where the image once had been, of the beautiful strewn about the pretty.

I will not cry. Breathe.

When the girl opened her eyes, streaks of sun were peeking through the pixelated clouds. The light was harsh and cold, and she shivered as the girl took more steps along the path—one, two, three, one, two, three—waltzing, pretty, trying not to cringe as more leaves crunched under her feet, beaten into the stone path underneath.

A city came into view. It was a replica of D.C., and as the girl continued onward, the *crunch crunch crunch* faded into silence, and the walkway became paved and clear. The streets were empty of everything except those pink-blossom trees and the smoke coiled between buildings like snakes that stung her eyes.

I will not cry. She could no longer breathe, had given up trying, and the sun became colder.

Hard crowds pushed the girl forward into the arms of a boy as he hugged her, held her, kissed her neck, her face, lips, hands wandering and she forced herself to moan so the clouds and the smoke would clear, and she forced herself to smile when he chuckled, so the screens of the sky *shimmered*.

The heavens were happy with their show.

She thought of pushing away the boy, the person she didn't know—not his name or face, just that his smell of bourbon dripped down her throat and into her lungs like a poison, liquid poison, making her drown ... drown But this was Graduation Day, and the girl could either finish the simulation or be arrested, so she let herself suffocate in that god-awful alcohol, let the boy drag her deeper into the city.

The pair came to a stop inside a store, a photography store, and the girl bit back a smile. The sign on the front desk said WE BUY YOUR PHOTOS. She went to the clerk—William, according to his name tag—and handed over her SD card. He shook his head, the lighting flickered, the smoke wafted back in, and the girl let her composure slip for a moment because for a moment, she didn't care.

Didn't I do what you asked? Lena asked the heavens (only not really, because how embarrassing would that be? how painful would that be? to live her life a failure) and thrust the SD card forward again, pushing it with her middle finger. The smoke hurt.

"I'm sorry for her. I'm John," the bourbon man told the clerk by way of introduction, wrapping his arm around the girl's shoulders.

"She's still a child, you know how they can ... miss some things. Allow me."

The clerk took the SD card—*her* SD card, though she didn't dare say anything—from the boy's hand. "We'll process these if you want to go through there, Sweetheart." He gestured to the door behind the desk.

The girl almost thought she'd done it, finished the simulation, until her gaze caught on the medical bed and the person standing beside it.

The nurse was a woman. The nurse didn't have a ring. The nurse was not confined to the halls of a house until their boy died and a Conforming school claimed them once more.

Lena smiled—escape! A woman, young and free.

"Sit," the nurse said simply, and the girl did so, excitedly, expectantly. "It'll all be over soon." The nurse stuck a syringe into the girl's arm, and the world faded ... faded ... faded ...

She opened her eyes. She was still on the table, the nurse standing over her, smiling. The girl tried to smile back, but her mouth was sore, stuck, and the nurse saw and giggled and repositioned a mirror, and the light blared so bright and so cold, but for once the girl didn't notice, couldn't notice. She could only stare into that mirror. Threads were sewn across her lips, rubies crusting where the needle had gone in and out, in and out, a quick waltz of

one, two, three, one, two, three and the girl wanted to cry but this was Graduation Day, she wanted to run but where would she run to?

“Pretty,” the nurse said, pulling her from the bed and pushing her through another door.

The goddesses of the heavens greeted the girl as she stumbled out of the simulation. Their mouths matched hers, blood still crusted at the edges of the skin-colored threads, so instead, the Review Panel handed her a stack of papers, stamps at the top. They read: A+, A+, A+, A+. The last one said "Happy Graduation Day!" and to celebrate, one of the goddesses laid a crown of pink heart-shaped flowers on her hair.

I. Am. Happy. thought the girl who couldn't smile.

John walked through a different door, smiling when he saw her. Smiling when he took her face in his hands and smiling when he whispered “pretty,” and the room of silent goddesses clapped, cold, stone. Smiling, he handed one countless green bills, and the girl saw her chance: she could run, run through the door, hide with the leaves in the forest and warn women to keep their pictures of four red veins and tell them to turn back while they had the chance; or maybe, they would stay with her in the forest, letting their voices chase away the mist and raising silent, middle fingers to the sky of screens and clenching their hands around those stupid blossoms until the petals were grey and beaten into the stone—

But John had come back to kiss her perfect face, wrap his arm around her perfect shoulders, put a ring on her perfect finger. And the girl waltzed forward—one, two, three, one, two, three.

Happy Graduation Day. She thought: *Aren't you pretty?*

Malia Noel

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

the things i will never admit aloud

dear diary:

i've been told before, that time heals all wounds.
i'm not sure I agree.
the wounds remain.
over time, the wounds scab and scar over,
but they are never truly gone.
the pain may lessen, but it is still there.

i will *never* admit to anyone i've ever known and met,
how desperately i crave and yearn to be loved for,
i don't think i could utter the words.

i will never admit how much i want someone to hold my wrists,
and kiss my palms and smile at me—

to *want* me.

i want to be wanted—i want to be loved—
and i'm not sure how long songs and soft poetry,
can keep these thoughts at length . . .

“abuse can feel like love,” my therapist told me, sitting in her chair.

(i blinked. silence. tick. tock. tick. tock. went the clock.)

“abuse can feel like love,” i breathed, staring into the air.

(i frown. thoughts mulling over in my head.)

[I remembered it then.]

[You cooked for me

once, in the time that we were together. Pasta. Gluten free.

I leaned against your doorway, not yet comfortable in any place that belonged to you, and explained
how touched I

was that you'd listened to my nervous babble on our first date. *No bread, but dairy is fine.*

It felt like the kindest thing anyone had ever done for me—taking the time to mix handmade pesto in a
white bowl, just for me. Clearing away a stack of unopened mail from the stool so I could sit and
watch, content with your company.

In retrospect, I can see that you gave me very little and I tried to build an entire future with it.

You must understand, I had never been remembered like *that*, before.

With purpose. *Without begging for it, crying on bloodstained knees.*

I took what I was offered and ran.]

“yes,” she murmurs, “for starving people will eat anything . . .”

(i remained so still i wasn't sure i was breathing. the words hung in the air.)

“because, my darling, we accept the love we think we deserve,” my therapist told me, sitting in her chair . . .

and it hurts.

it hurts because there's a hole too large and too bloody,

to cover with bandaids.

so I'll just have to grit my teeth and sew it closed.

Hannah Paalhar

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Marcelline High School, Marcelline, MO

Educator: Julie Sheerman

Category: Poetry

The Grocery Bag in the Parking Lot.

A bag of groceries left on the ground in a parking lot.
The woman bought them on her way home from work.
But as she was putting it in her car, the phone rang.
Her fiance passed away, she dropped everything and left.

A bag of groceries left on the ground in a parking lot.
Her mom asked her to go get the ingredients for her favorite dessert.
She was walking outside on the phone with her mother telling her of the price.
The van stopped by and pulled her in, she dropped everything she had left.

A bag of groceries left on the ground in a parking lot.
An elderly woman stopped with her cane to pick up a bag of groceries out of her cart.
While she was lifting her arm, she became dizzy.
Sirens heard in the distance signaled nothing was alright, 5 minutes later the ambulance left.

A bag of groceries left on the ground in a parking lot.
He hated when customers did this.
His boss would always question him on who dropped it.
He took the bag inside, clocked out, got on the bus and left.

Aarnavi Paduru

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Poetry

The Rattler

THE RATTLER

I maneuvered over the cadaver lying lifelessly in the grass
And slithered away from the layers of leaves beneath me.
As I left for my lair
I noticed a rodent racing across the field.
Hungered, I hissed at it,
Making it paralyzed by panic.
I was relatively near my residence
When I heard a hoot,
The discord of destruction.
I then became the one frozen with fear,
Too terrified to turn around.
I couldn't move at the moment.
Lamentably, it was too late.
It flew higher and higher into the golden illumination,
And I just laid there, languishing in the grass.

Lara Pimentel

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Humor

National Council of Brilliance

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

A teenage boy tapes paper signs onto chairs, one grade number per row. This is PHOENIX, who has a *Type A* personality with the mannerisms of a frat bro.

In the corner of the room is TIM, the advisor for the student council.

TIM CONFESSIONAL

TIM

Our school prides itself on the fact that our council is almost entirely student operated.

A teenage girl, LYLA, walks in with a computer and a safe. She immediately sits down and opens the safe. Hundreds of dollars in cash flow out. Phoenix helps her count it.

TIM (V.O)

I only come in with a simple comment every now and then. The kids are the ones who make the ideas, vote on the ideas, deal with the money, the organizing, the phone calls. It's really awesome to see.

Phoenix knocks a stack of twenty dollar bills onto the floor. It goes everywhere. Tim does absolutely nothing as Phoenix struggles to gather the money.

TIM (V.O)

Not to brag, but we're considered a "National Council of Brilliance" by the National Association of Student Councils.

PHOENIX CONFESSIONAL

PHOENIX

You know, I'm actually pretty stoked that you're documenting this whole thing. I feel like... to most people, Homecoming is just a couple hours, then an after-party. They don't really realize that it actually takes months to put together, which is why we have to start in July. It sounds intense, I know.

SHOT OF: Phoenix, under his covers, at night, frantically scrolling through website after website trying to find a good Homecoming theme.

PHOENIX (V.O)

I like to think that I'm not an intense guy at all. I'm actually really laid back. But...planning ahead is absolutely necessary. Last year, Carmen never planned ahead, and it was a mess.

Eventually, high schoolers start entering the room. There are a total of about 30 students. Phoenix smiles.

PHOENIX

Yo, yo, yo! For those of you who don't know me, if you're a freshie or a newbie or whatever, I'm Phoenix, your *beloved* student council president. It'd be pretty cool if you all sat with your grade, as indicated with the signs. Obviously, when we get closer to August, I'm gonna encourage you guys to mingle with new people, but for now, I want you guys in the rows.

Everyone sits down.

LYLA

I'm Lyla, your treasurer. Before any freshmen get any ideas, if you take money from the safe, I. Will. Know.

TIM

That's not... Don't intimidate the new ones, Lyla.

LYLA

Sorry.

Pause.

LYLA

But I'm serious. I have eyes EVERYWHERE. Be afraid.

LYLA CONFESSIONAL

LYLA

Last school year, there was a bit of a problem with a certain freshman boy (cough) Tyler (cough) stealing money from our safe to pay for his girlfriend's Winter Formal ticket.

TYLER, a (now) sophomore sitting near the back, stares at her blankly. She glares back.

LYLA (V.O)

-and you know, if he'd just stopped there, it would be no big deal. Tickets were just \$15.

LYLA CONFESSIONAL

LYLA

Except, he paid for her dress too. And her shoes. And her nails. And her corsage. And her boutonniere, which she gave to him. Yeah, he paid for his *own* boutonniere. I'd never seen a man so desperate in my life.

A boy walks in holding a bag and a 2-liter bottle of soda. This is VINNIE, the council's golden boy.

VINNIE

Sorry for being late. I was getting bagels.

Phoenix just grins.

PHOENIX CONFESSIONAL

PHOENIX

Normally, I'd get annoyed by people being late, but... I don't know.

Vinnie starts chugging the soda.

PHOENIX (V.O)

There's something about him. You just can't get mad at Vinnie. Ever. Except Carmen. She could've gotten mad at anyone.

VINNIE

Yo, are those freshmen?

Three freshman in the back wave awkwardly, except for one. AARON, a wannabe redneck who speaks in a FAKE country accent, does a two-finger salute. He's wearing a cowboy hat and cowboy boots.

AARON

Howdy.

VINNIE

Woah. Are you from the South?

AARON

Nope. Born 'n raised here, baby. Name's Aaron.

AARON CONFSSIONAL

AARON

People like to think they know me just from the way I sound, but I'm probably the most progressive cowboy in America.

Back to present:

AARON

(winking at Vinnie)

But you can call me anything you want.

Aaron takes a small sip out of his plastic water bottle. Phoenix glances at the camera, confused.

VINNIE

...Got it. Anyways, I'm Vinnie, the vice president, which sounds really fancy but don't be scared! When I was a freshman, I was *terrified* of the seniors, and I don't want you guys to feel the same way!

Vinnie takes a seat near where Phoenix is standing, setting the bagels on the table.

PHOENIX

Okay. Now that we're all here: we need a game plan. Homecoming is in 67 days. That might sound like a lot of time, but trust me: it's not. So, we need to walk out of this room knowing exactly what our theme is, and then sometime next week, me, Lyla, and Vinnie will be making assignments as to who is in charge of what. Got it?

Everyone nods.

PHOENIX

Freshmen, I get that you've never had a Homecoming, so if you just want to observe, that's fine.

Silence...

PHOENIX

So, any ideas? No idea is a bad idea here, guys. We're just brainstorming.

TYLER

The Hunger Games?

PHOENIX

No.

TYLER

Mamma Mia?

PHOENIX

No.

Phoenix starts pacing back and forth.

TYLER

Avengers?

PHOENIX

No! No more movies. We can't keep forcing spirit week themes into movie lines. People are tired of it.

TYLER
Got it.

Long pause.

AARON
Cowboys?

PHOENIX
...I want you to contemplate what you just said.

TYLER
Candyland?

PHOENIX
Boys will make fun of it.

TYLER
Ooh! What about "Tiktok Trends"?

Phoenix stops pacing.

PHOENIX
No. Absolutely not.

TYLER
(groans)
Why not?

VINNIE CONFSSIONAL

VINNIE
Look, I love Phoenix, but sometimes when he's under stress, he can get really mean and snappy. Like one of those scary looking turtles.

SHOT OF: Tyler and Phoenix full on arguing now, while Vinnie has his face in his hands.

VINNIE (V.O)
I try and keep him calm as much as I can, but there's only so much a bro can do, you feel me?

TYLER
It would definitely interest people!

PHOENIX
You know what else interests people?
(pause)
Serial killers.

TYLER
What does that have to do with-

PHOENIX
Do you want a serial killer themed Homecoming?

TYLER
I never said that-

PHOENIX

Picture this, okay? The hot girl in your physics class comes up to you and asks, 'Why do the tickets look like Jack the Ripper's victim's guts smashed onto a bookmark?' and you have to be like, 'We thought serial killers were interesting' and then there'll be a really long awkward silence, and that girl is NOT going to want to go out with you, no matter what you say, so you should just give up now before you go down a long, dark, road!

TYLER
(bewildered)
Dude, what?

PHOENIX

My point is, we can't just choose a theme because it seems interesting. We need a theme that comes with decoration ideas, merch ideas, something that clubs can make floats out of!

A junior, PAIGE, speaks up. She's really pretty.

PAIGE
What about 'Welcome to the Jungle'? It's simple enough that we could make decorations really easily, but it's not so basic that it's boring.

PHOENIX
Now that's what I'm talking about!

PAIGE
And we could even reuse some of the decorations that the Environmental club used for their float last year! Didn't they have vines?

PHOENIX
That's a great idea! ...You know, once I graduate, I think you'd make a great president.

PAIGE CONFESSIONAL

PAIGE
Phoenix has been my role model since freshman year. I've always admired his whole 'go-with-the-flow' vibe and his ability to get people to where they need to be. He also has really nice hair. And eyes.

Back to present:

PAIGE
(heart eyes)
Really?

PHOENIX
Yeah!

Paige beams. Vinnie fake vomits behind his desk.

VINNIE
God, get a room.

PHOENIX
I didn't mean it like that...

AARON
Wait, wait, wait. Are y'all (pointing at Vinnie and Phoenix) ...bangin'?

EVERYONE
(turning around to face him)
WHAT?

Aaron just shrugs.

PHOENIX CONFSSIONAL

PHOENIX

I have NO idea why Aaron would ask that. Vinnie and I are just bros, you know?

VINNIE CONFSSIONAL

VINNIE

I think the best way to describe me and Phoenix would be... Have you ever seen Ratatouille? Okay. So like, I'm kinda like the little rat dude, and he's like the chef dude, and even though he's technically in charge of everything, I'm the one doing all the work behind the scenes. Pulling his hair and stuff.

TIM CONFSSIONAL

TIM

No comment...?

Back to present:

PHOENIX

No. We're not 'bangin'. Also, this is the Midwest! No one has a Southern accent. You sound stupid when you fake one.

AARON

Did I strike a nerve?

PHOENIX

If you keep talking, someone's nerves are gonna get damaged, *and they aren't gonna be mine*

Everyone gasps.

TIM

Phoenix!

VINNIE

(guiding Phoenix to a chair)

Okay. Let's all just chill out.

LYLA

(standing up)

Agreed. All in favor of "Welcome to the Jungle" say "aye"?

EVERYONE

Aye.

LYLA

All opposed say "nay".

AARON

Nay.

Everyone just stares at him, unimpressed.

LYLA

Okay. Meeting adjourned. You all can go home now.

PHOENIX

(to Lyla)

I'm the one who's supposed to say that!

LYLA
Calm down, princess.

PHOENIX CONFESSIONAL

PHOENIX
The meeting didn't go exactly how I planned, but that's okay!

SHOT OF: Phoenix, in a fetal position, rocking back and forth in the corner of the, now empty, classroom.

PHOENIX (V.O)
I would consider myself a pretty flexible guy. I honestly think the dance will end up being great!

INT. HIGH SCHOOL LOBBY

The lobby is huge. Colorful tables and chairs occupy most of the space. Everyone is long gone...

Except Aaron, sitting alone at a table, looking at his phone, his water bottle next to him. Phoenix walks out of the classroom nearby, where the meeting was taking place. He stayed behind to "tidy up the room".

PHOENIX
Yo, you got a ride coming?

AARON
My sister's on her way.

Awkward pause.

PHOENIX
She in high school?

AARON
Nope.

Phoenix sits down next to him, setting his bag on the floor.

PHOENIX
Hey, I wanted to apologize for earlier. I shouldn't have acted the way I did.

Aaron stays quiet, still on his phone.

PHOENIX (CONT'D)
It's just that, I'm still really new to being president and let's just say... it's a lot more stressful than I thought it was.
(pause)

You know, I used to make jokes last year about how I could do everything the president at the time could do, but better. Her name was Carmen, and she was so pissed at the time. But I think I get it now.
(pause)

I think some of the stress got to my head today, and I took it out on you, which wasn't fair. So, I'm sorry.

AARON
You're all good, man.

Aaron sets his phone down and grabs his water bottle, still mostly full, and opens it. Right before he's about to take a drink, he looks at it closer, squinting.

AARON
Hey, I think a fly flew into my water.

He holds the bottle close to Phoenix's face.

AARON
Do you see it?

PHOENIX
(looking for it)
Hm. I don't think so. Where do you-

Aaron squeezes the bottle, causing the water to shoot up, which completely soaks Phoenix and gets water all over the floor.

PHOENIX
WHAT THE-

AARON
(standing up)
My sister's here! You know, I never even ran for student council. Y'all should really check the roster closer.

Aaron walks out the door. Phoenix stands up, to get a look at whoever this little rascal's sister could be.

His jaw drops. Of course...

AARON'S SISTER
(fake smile)
Hi, Phoenix! I hope the meeting today went well!

PHOENIX
(fakes smile)
Hey Carmen... It actually went perfectly! Thanks for checking up!

Aaron turns around to face Phoenix, placing a hand on his cowboy hat to combat the wind.

AARON
Feminism, bitch!

He gets into the car with his sister. They drive off, leaving Phoenix by himself. After standing in shock for a few seconds, Phoenix finally goes back inside to grab his bag. Except, his bag is right in the middle of the puddle made by Aaron's water.

Slowly and carefully, he tries to pick his bag up from under the table, trying not to slip.

Eventually, he gets it. He tries to start walking towards the door when...

He slips. And falls. On his face. Hard. The contents of his bag fly everywhere.

PHOENIX
OW!

THE END.

Lara Pimentel

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Critical Essay

Racial Diversity in Hollywood: It's Time to Flip the Script

Hollywood tends to advertise itself as being mindful of society's ever-progressing norms. For an industry centered around depicting real life as fiction, one would assume that being culturally aware would be an important aspect of serving its function well. However, in recent years, this hasn't seemed to be the case. We as viewers constantly encounter tone deafness, racial stereotypes, and tropes coming from the industry claiming to represent us. Cultural insensitivity in the film industry is an epidemic that must be stopped.

Impact

Movies significantly affect the way in which we view those around us. Joe Feagin, a sociology professor at Texas A&M, once said that: "...most white Americans accept much of what they see in the mass media as real and use this misinformation to make judgments about the society around them". Life imitates art, meaning the media that we consume shifts our perception of reality. Therefore, the art and entertainment industries are powerhouses in terms of their impact on society.

A recent report from UCLA's College of Social Sciences found that from 2020 to 2021, there had been an increase of people of color in lead roles in movies. Although this could be argued as proof of Hollywood's progress, it doesn't show the bigger picture. In that same report, UCLA found little to no changes in terms of racial diversity behind the scenes, seeing as still, less than one-third of screenwriters and directors are people of color. Although people of color are getting *casted* in more roles, they most likely lack creative control over the story they are portraying, which results in showrunners using tropes and stereotypes to fill in the blanks of their own ignorance. Instead of letting this practice continue, Hollywood needs to start actively welcoming diversity both on and off-screen.

Breaking In

It is commonly agreed upon that the most challenging part of pursuing a career in the film industry is just getting a foot through the door. When it comes to the world of entertainment, it really *is* all about who you know. Furthermore, the biggest criticism of the "nepotism babies" in Hollywood is that they have an unfair advantage when it comes to networking, because they are essentially born into the "room" that most people spend years trying to reach. However, not everyone seems to agree. Lily Rose Depp, the daughter of a Hollywood moviestar and a French supermodel, once said in an interview with Vogue Australia: "It is obviously a really easy assumption to make to think that I would just have roles landing on my doorstep because of my name, but that's an idea I've always kind of rejected. I've always been under the impression that I have to work twice as hard to prove to people that I'm not just here because it's easy for me".

Here's where Depp falls short: To even have the opportunity to show one's talent to industry professionals is an immense privilege that many people of color do not have the luxury of experiencing, and the reasons for this can be easily traced back to historical events that have built walls between families of color and the ability to accumulate generational wealth. A significant factor at play is geographic location. The U.S Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections indicated in their 2013 report that unlike many other careers, where there are opportunities in a multitude of locations, job openings in the film industry are almost exclusive to film "hubs", such as Los Angeles and New York City. Therefore, if one were to want even a chance at success, they would have to move to one of these areas.

The problem with this is that most people cannot afford to pack up their lives and move to these expensive cities,

especially people of color. Throughout history, communities of color have been consistently shown to be more likely to experience poverty (“Racial Disparities”). This is due to a practice known as redlining, which was popular in the United States from the 1920s to the 1970s. Redlining entailed the withdrawal of funds and services to neighborhoods that were considered “dangerous”(“What Is Redlining?”). Having said that, the University of Richmond found that more often than not, “dangerous” was *synonymous* with “black” or “latino”. In other words, many communities of color are put at an automatic financial disadvantage, and without proper funding to go towards improving education or providing employment opportunities, those who are members of these communities will likely never get the chance to leave their environment.

Standing Out

Even *if* young filmmakers of color can afford to live in these costly cities, there is still another layer to consider when it comes to making a career in Hollywood: finding someone to represent your work. Producers, talent agents, and casting directors hold an immense amount of power over who can succeed. Having proper representation in an industry that relies on connections is vital, but finding someone willing to represent a piece of work about a non-white experience is more challenging than one might initially believe.

An anonymous television writer once shared that: “Your average agent is a 50-year-old white guy ... who never had to stretch to see [himself] in other people or spaces. So [such agents will] have a harder time representing people they don’t personally relate to” (McKinsey & Company). Networks *want* to outperform their competitors, but instead of turning to diverse stories, they tend to push them away in fear of losing relatability to their white viewers. However, what these networks fail to understand is that the general public tends to react positively when diverse media is created. Not only are diverse stories informative and refreshing, but they also tend to be more creative.

Take *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* as an example. The film, following a family of Chinese immigrants discovering the multiverse, made history by quickly climbing the ranks and becoming A24’s highest grossing movie ever, surpassing their previous blockbusters, *Hereditary*, and *Ladybird* (“All Time”). Not only that, but the movie received endless acclaim from people of *all* backgrounds, some of which included actors Daniel Radcliffe and Anne Hathaway. Radcliffe, describing it as “the best film he’s seen in years” and Hathaway, stating that she was “buoyed” by the success of the film, indicating that it’s a prime example of creativity and sentiment triumphing over Hollywood’s *typical* blockbuster (Christopherson); (“Anne Hathaway”).

Unfortunately, most movies that entail similar authenticity as *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* are more likely to get turned down by big production companies, which starts making sense if one were to look at the demographics of those holding positions in power. About 90% of talent agents are white, along with 92% of film executives and 87% of television executives (McKinsey & Company). Change would have to start from behind the camera, but those who have the power to make that change choose not to. While there have been *some* improvements within the past couple years, there still will not be any significant change if the issue is left untouched.

The Game Changers

Change may seem out of the public's control, but that is not the case. There are multiple organizations that are dedicated to combating this inequality. Whether their approach is opening up networking opportunities, expanding resources to those in need, or researching the topic more extensively to help identify solutions to the root problem, it’s a relief to know that there are thousands of people who actively fight for inclusion every day.

For example, *Mentorship Matters* is a non-profit organization that specializes in helping young screenwriters of color acquire experience in the industry by pairing them up with working professionals at top-name networks. They’ve acknowledged that the inequality that we see in writers rooms stem from the lack of networking opportunities that are available to people of color. Through this program, not only are young writers able to make meaningful connections with those in the industry, but they’re given a space to practice their craft, as well as get feedback from professionals.

Additionally, organizations such as *Illuminative* and the *Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment* advocate for more diversity by providing resources to specific ethnic minorities that would help them succeed, resources that would otherwise only be offered at expensive higher education institutions. Whether it be through workshops or fellowships, their mission is to empower people of color in order to help them pursue careers in the entertainment industry.

Furthermore, the University of Southern California, which was ranked as the #1 film school in the country by The Hollywood Reporter in 2018, has an *Inclusionist Initiative*, which performs extensive research over specific topics that fall under diversity in the entertainment industry. By releasing yearly reports, they are able to hold moviemakers and production companies accountable for their poor, or lack of representation within their projects.

The Brightside

The less social power a marginalized group possesses, the less power they are able to project. A powerhouse such as Hollywood must use its status to amplify the voices of the unheard. Thankfully, public support for diverse films has been on the rise within the past few years, following the rise of critically-acclaimed films such as *Get Out*, directed by Jordan Peele, and *Crazy Rich Asians*, directed by Jon M. Chu. Adding on to the multitude of organizations fighting for the cause, it's no longer naive to hope for change, because change *will* happen, sooner or later.

To feel seen and understood is one of the greatest gifts we can give to each another. In an age where people are more polarized than ever regarding identity politics, to sit down and at least *try* to understand each other would be beneficial to all. If we were to take the time to learn about each other's cultures, we would realize that in reality, we aren't as divided as we think we are.

Our misconceptions about one another are manmade. To deconstruct them, we must not only look to the media, but to each other.

Haley Puglisi

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Humor

Duck!

Duck!

At the young age of seven, I learned that giving into conformity in order to survive in this world wasn't just a "teenager" thing. It was a human thing. So human in fact, it dates back to the stone age. It was as sincere as cosmic tides crashing into salty bays. It was as tangible as the scrutinizing scabs enveloping your palms like polka dots after nosediving off your "Razor" scooter, hands plastered into the pavement of the sidewalk. It was as momentous as the shaky breath the wind released on an overcast day. In words, more concrete for a seven-year-old, conformity and self-preservation mixed together are like broccoli ice cream. Ew.

It gets messy real quick. One moment, the chill of the ice cream aisle at your local convenience store embodies you, the aroma of sugar sprinkled throughout the air, flushing your cheeks pink. Ice cream of practically every flavor pops out at you. Bubblegum Blast, Blissful Butterscotch, Pristine Pistachio...and then BAM! Broccoli Icecream. You think, "Ew, that's disgusting! I would never in a million years enjoy something like that!" But then society convinces you that you want it. You *need* it. Bile crawls up your throat the second it grazes your tongue, yet you convince yourself that the taste is exquisite, beyond any other flavor on the planet. While that may be an awful metaphor, that's exactly what happened to me. The summer of second grade I became a victim of broccoli ice cream.

I bounced on my toes, feet burning from the sizzling concrete the sun had baked. I was anxiously waiting for my mom to finish untangling the knot of goggles the pool bag had somehow managed to create within the past 24 hours. Jean* and Scarlet* were here! And I was electrified. I had barely seen them all summer, and here they were, at my neighborhood pool! Jean with her ashy blonde hair pulled up in a tight bun and her navy blue one piece, spotted with big white polka-dots. And Scarlet, her hair as blonde as the fluffy clouds in the sky, chopped short and hung loose on her shoulders, wearing a hot pink two-piece with a cartoon watermelon design on the top. And then there was me, my long, wavy brown hair the color of chocolate dancing in the wind as it pleased, wearing my old swim team one-piece. It was perfect.

My moms' lips slightly parted as her steady hands worked out the last few knots in the goggles and handed each of us a pair. "Race you!" Jean shouted, her dimples popping. Snapping the goggles on her head, she dashed for the deep end. Scarlet and I frantically pulled the goggles over our eyes and cannon-balled into the water.

We swam until our bodies shivered and our stomachs growled. I wrapped my Ariel towel around my shoulders; now toasted from the sun. All-encompassing pleasure radiated from my body from the sudden warmth. We practically flew up the stairs to the pavilion, decking two steps at a time, to devour our lunches. My mom had packed me a peanut-butter banana and honey sandwich, my favorite. I heard the metallic crinkle of Scarlet's goldfish bag, as she popped a cheese-dusted fish onto her tongue.

Suddenly, we heard a CLICK! and GROANNN! All of our heads snapped in towards that direction, and there, standing at the gate, was May Stevens*. May was one of those girls at school that was considered "annoying". She had a tendency to follow her friends around and do virtually anything they did. Though, I didn't mind her. In fact, we were friends. May's mom, fresh with a tan and blonde hair shimmering in the sun just like her daughter, walked down the steps with May.

Instantaneously, Jean whisper shouted, “Duck!” and with automaticity, my body dropped down into a crouch, peering over the intricate metal table. May’s mom’s gaze traveled over our general area. *Did she see us?* May was looking around, seemingly oblivious to the situation. My mom hissed through the corner of her teeth, “Haley Katherine, get up right this minute!” her eyes were flaming with a fire I’d never seen them possess before. I slowly rose and so did Jean and Scarlet, and I felt as if the sun had shone a spotlight on our rusty little table, but I didn’t audition. My mom said a quick hi to May and her mother, and mumbled under her breath just loud enough for us to hear, “We’re going girls.”

As soon as the door closed on our White Honda Odyssey, my mom locked her livid, fire-breathing eyes on mine and growled, “Haley Katherine, you’re grounded!” She was white-knuckling the steering wheel. “That was completely unacceptable and frankly, I didn’t think I raised you like that. I’m infuriated! What if May saw? I’m very disappointed in you.” I had never seen my mom that mad in the whole seven years I’ve lived on this planet. She just *had* to drop the, “I’m very disappointed in you.” bomb. It was, and always is a huge punch in the gut leaving you physically dizzy, and mentally searching. It was the bomb that every kid on planet earth dreaded. It was worse than getting grounded. I’d rather have her ground me for two months than tell me she’s disappointed in me. But I wasn’t going to let up that easily. My insides were boiling with the accusation, and adrenaline pulsed through my veins. How dare she? I didn’t do anything wrong! *Yes, you did.* It was Jean’s fault! *And yours.*

Tears burned my eyes, clinging on for dear life. It took every ounce of my self-control to swallow the sob bellowing in my throat. It tasted like broccoli ice cream. Ew. Jean and Scarlet kept sneaking glances at me, and my cheeks burned. The rest of the ride was dead silent.

*Names have been changed.

Grace Qian

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shruti Upadhyay

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Dumpling Question

“Come here and have a xiaolongbao!” My grandmother smiled as she picked up a round, translucent bun decorated with detailed folds of dough that hugged a portion of soy sauce-soaked pork filling. In the warm lighting, her light gray hair exuded brightness, highlighting her smile lines which framed her small face. I scrambled to pick up my bowl and chopsticks – nearly dropping them in my eagerness. My grandmother laughs at my haste, knowing my love for xiaolongbao, “I know you love bao, but slow down.”

Xiao long bao, or soup-filled dumpling, is a traditional Chinese dumpling that is notoriously difficult to eat, requiring utmost skill with chopsticks to carefully tear a hole into the dumpling’s paper-thin skin and slowly sip the steaming savory soup before adding soy sauce to consume the rest of the dumpling in one singular bite of euphoria. I considered myself a dumpling connoisseur, having eaten so many dumplings that I felt blazingly confident with my form and skills. However, as I took my first bite of the mouth-watering dumpling, I realized in a jolt that I had made a couple of significant beginner mistakes; I had not sipped the soup out of the dumpling and had taken only one bite, leaving the hot soup dribbling down my chin. My mouth burned, but I stubbornly refused to spit the dumpling out – it was too delicious – and instead cried out in pain. My relatives, who had been in conversation, one after another turned to me, first with eyes of concern, then with smiles on their faces as they realized my amateur error.

I felt my cheeks turn a bright shade of red as what seemed like a waterfall of xiao long bao soup poured through my half-open mouth, pooling into a lake on my plate. As I sat there watching a full round table of my relatives laugh, my 10-year-old self felt, for the first time, that the attention was too much. No matter if I convinced myself they were not laughing at me, only my laughable actions, I could not shake off the tinge of an unfamiliar feeling. It was the same, shameful feeling I’d get walking into school naked with all my flaws on display to the world. It was embarrassment. Three words encapsulated how I felt: I. Didn’t. Belong. And as I mentally closed myself off, seeing the light of the room gradually turning to a shade of gray, then black, I heard my auntie laugh and lightheartedly comment in the distance:

“Ah, she really is a meiguoren.” My infantile ears rushed the stimulus to my brain and translated the words as the meaning reached the forefront of my mind. American. My heart dropped. The truth hit me hard; no matter how hard I tried to be Chinese– fit the humble Chinese customs of never taking a compliment, learning the art of clutching minuscule objects with chopsticks, and drinking hot tea instead of water– I would still be an American. Innocent and unknowing how to eat a simple dumpling. The dumpling incident revealed my Chinese facade and left me in a lonely confusion about my identity. If I wasn’t Chinese, what was I?

In the years following, I ignored the dumpling question, instead finding solace in the company of my American friends. My gradual assimilation began with inadvertently speaking more English to my parents at home, progressed with my insistence on purchasing lululemon brand shorts, and reached its peak when I stopped eating rice and other Chinese cuisine staples. However, dumplings were always a safe food for me – I could never pass a fried chicken and vegetable Ling Ling potsticker. In middle school, if I woke up to the glorious smell of toasted dumpling skin accompanied by the sound of sizzling, I knew that in a few hours I could look forward to eating five Ling Ling dumplings packed into a black cylindrical thermos. On one particular day, I excitedly opened my lunch, twisted off the black cap, and bathed in the smell of the dumplings. Just as I was about to dig in, I overheard a voice that stood out amidst the lunchroom chatter,

“What is that smell?” I slowly turned around to see a girl from the other table eyeing me and my dumplings.

“Oh - it’s Chinese food,” I responded nonchalantly, shrugging my shoulders and taking a bite. As usual, the dumpling had the perfect balance of savory meat and crunchy skin. As I dreamily consumed bite after bite of the delectable dumplings, I felt myself slip into my happy place. However, my ears remained alert, picking up a few words,

“Gosh, that stinks.” The words stung. Hot shame rose in my chest, paralyzing my throat and depositing a red flush on my face. Glancing around my table to see an assortment of ham sandwiches, cheese pizza slices, and cream cheese

bagels, I sat in silent shock, feeling completely othered with my dumplings for lunch.

“Don’t let her get to you. It’s your culture, you’re Chinese.” My friend said soothingly. But I didn’t feel comforted. Instead, I felt myself shrink. I was a lonely ship bobbing in dark black water with a floating iceberg in front of me. Small and unassuming, the iceberg seemed to be the least of my problems. But as I came closer, it became clear that under the tip, the churning ocean surface concealed a monster.

If I wasn’t American or Chinese, who was I?

While originating as a sense of imposter syndrome as a youth in China, the dumpling question had evolved to become the all-encompassing question of who I was, what I represented, and where I fit in. In the eyes of my Chinese family, I was American. In the eyes of my American friends, I was Chinese. I felt alone in my struggle, with nobody who understood me and my identity.

But it’s different whenever I’m in Chinatown. The bright red lanterns, the glowing yellow diners, and the shiny copper buddha statues constitute the sweet nostalgia of Chinatown. The mix of Chinglish, or Chinese and English, is music to my ears. The savory smell of steaming dumplings is perfume to my nose. The sight of families huddled together in front of small shops brings a smile to my lips. The taste of snowy white rice is the comforting taste of home. Chinatown is the key to my heart. It’s a place where the mix of my two cultures come together in a cohesive balance. It’s where I go when I’m feeling alone. And once in a while, when I’m craving something, I’ll order a serving of xiao long bao from a vendor. Or fry up some Ling Ling dumplings. Even though I always get flashbacks to all the times in my life when I had been confused with the dumpling question and the identity crises it brought, it’s also an acknowledgment of my personal growth. As the xiao long bao soup dribbles down my chin, I look around and smile, for all my friends have similar streams of soup, with some even having soup drip down the ends of their jet-black hair. As we hunch our mouths over our plates and share secret smiles, the ache of not belonging fades momentarily, and it’s in those moments when I know I’m not alone in my struggle.

Charlie Rubin

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Benjamin Murphy

Category: Critical Essay

Tweet to Tantrum

Social media. Not to sound overly cliché or anything, but the problem of perceived censorship in our school (among countless others) is directly spawned from the very platforms that give people the outlet to express themselves in the first place. Back in the days before apps like Twitter, Instagram, and even TikTok (AKA The Middle Ages), you had to try really, really hard to surround yourself with people who shared your verbatim beliefs. Some (mostly politicians) succeeded in the task, but that was a rare privilege for a select few. Now, the algorithm gives everyone their own personalized echo chamber for free!

It's not that people are afraid to share out their controversial ideas. By and large, the internet has inflated the (already large) egos of students in the Lawndale (name changed for privacy) bubble, making them unafraid to share their beliefs with anyone and everyone. Believe me, if you want to hear someone's opinion on a topic they're wholly uneducated on, you need not go further than the LHS cafeteria, where everyone talks and nobody listens. When everyone simultaneously shares their beliefs, refusing to listen to anyone else's, nothing gets done and everyone gets mad. Considering that Lawndale is relatively homogenous, many expect school life to be as agreeable as their For You pages, so when ideas and core beliefs are openly challenged, people get *really* mad. This issue has notably impacted history and English teachers.

During history class in March, we learned about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Well, learn might be too strong of a verb here, because the entire time, I could see my history teacher tip-toeing around language, briskly skipping over words and phrases, doing anything to remain impartial. Many of my classmates were preestablished to have... strong feelings about the situation. We're in a Saint Louis suburb here, the room reeks of gefilte fish (and I'm more of a horseradish person myself, being candid. Don't tell my bubbe). The classroom was a minefield, my teacher a hopeless soldier trying not to get blown up. It was like trying to watch a circus clown juggle live grenades, blindfolded, with the threat of zealous Zionists with powerful parents on the school board looming over him, ready to pounce and strike. Strong, explosive opinions don't change within a 1 ½ hour (painfully) long history block, and any perceived challenge to their ideas would make anyone on either side of the polarizing issue double down on their original thought processes, a byproduct of their one-sided internet habits. One verbal "whoopsie-daisy" from the teacher could end up with phone calls to the administration, a reprimanding, and before you know it Dr. Dan Gutchewsky shows up in your office telling you that you need to be more politically correct when educating the arrogant and youthful masses. It's not like this is new to education, but I feel the gargantuan opinionated narcissism of the students (and the parents, I mean the students get their egos from somewhere) enabled by social media isn't helping the whole ordeal.

Social media has also killed the benefit of the doubt. (Not that it was entirely kickin' and thrivin' to begin with). I've seen teachers treated abysmally (or at least, more horribly than usual, deepest apologies to Señora Ramirez for the *toothpaste incident*) for books that they have no choice in teaching. At the beginning of the year, many of my adolescent brethren were complaining about how there was misogyny in the *Catcher in the Rye*, hysterically screeching that it shouldn't be taught as a result. I had to take a deep breath and ask myself if my classmates were just missing the *entire* point of why we read that book in the first place. They were. I haven't viewed the books we've read at Lawndale as inherently harmful to teach, maybe boring, dull, mind-numbing, or soul-crushing, but not catastrophic. However, even if I did view them as somewhat "dangerous," it'd be abhorrent to attack the educators over it.

An adolescent verbal onslaught on a harmless teacher does nothing but hurt class dialogue. To threaten the parental phone call, the condemnation, the so on and so forth simply because you don't agree with something is ineffective to fostering a healthy learning environment. When things like this happen, it feels like teachers are afraid to have open discussions with their students about tough topics, hurting civil discourse.

The 280 character limit of Twitter has reconditioned people to think hyper-literally (that is, when they choose to

think at all). When people take a book, a topic, an idea at face value, and then bleat about their own misinformed interpretation of a concept, civilized discussion is dead on arrival. I've heard stories about teachers being handed down notices from administration after an infuriated parent/student duo complained about the content of Lawndale's education, so it's more than understandable why discourse is critically endangered. There are so many problems, but what about a solution? Is there any solution at all? It's hard to imagine that there is. Frankly, barring the internet getting destroyed overnight and everyone getting insta-amnesia and immediately forgetting about it, it's impossible to imagine things will be any other way in the coming future. Everyone just deafly yells at each other in the meantime.

Rhea Sadagopan

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Diane Morris

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

She Danced

She Danced

When people ask me about my elementary school, I never know what to tell them. The simplest answer is that I want to scream profanities at it every time that I drive past the building.

I went to a private school named Academy Montessori Internationale. The school itself was small and cozy-looking. From the outside, it looks welcoming. The school is surrounded by nature: there's a wood on the left, a bamboo forest behind it, and a lake hidden in an enclave. It's located on the Missouri side of State Line Road past the decrepit Beauty Brands with the tell-tale swoop of the roof. The driveway is windy and leads to the portico of the school.

AMI was founded by Ms. Stone and Ms. Angela. They were driving down State Line Road when they saw the building. Ms. Angela took one look at it, took in the vibrant red roof and the nature surrounding the place, and envisioned a place where young minds could grow. Being a Montessori school, there are certain assumptions made about it: it's more open-minded about education than public schools and students typically do better academically than public school students.

When I was a student, there were about ninety kids ranging from preschool through fifth grade. That meant that there was more pressure on every student to excel. Each student starting in preschool, where kids are no more than 4 years old, was responsible for choosing what they wanted to learn for the day. I knew how to write in cursive before I knew how to print my name, I could do multiplication and division by the time I was in the first grade, and I could identify parts of speech before I was seven. But I didn't learn how to be a child.

Once, when I was in the second grade, I was sitting in the area reserved for the principal and her "favorites," an area one step higher than the rest of the Lower Elementary room, when Ms. Stone, the revered principal with all the wisdom of God, informed me that I was behind in mathematics. I was not able to do Algebra at a level that satisfied her. I was spending too much time distinguishing subjects and predicates and not enough time becoming familiar with variables and equations. When I was in the third grade, Mr. Melville found me sitting on a swing set on the last day of school. He told me that I was reading books that lessened my potential. I made myself despise Percy Jackson for years to dissuade myself from continuing the series. I couldn't disappoint my teachers.

AMI's redeeming feature was the nature surrounding it. The building itself may have been cramped on the inside and the people running it may have done nothing but pressure the children, but the outside was outstanding. The play area was split into four distinct sections: a playset with swings that was sheltered by trees, two other playsets in the open that were "susceptible to attack," a soccer field that was seldom used, and finally, an open area that connected to the driveway. The latter had a small labyrinth that we, the students, were required to walk around once a year to commemorate Ms. Angela's death. The Labyrinth, contrary to its commanding name, was merely a large circle covered in gravel with an outline of a maze formed by bricks. When walking through it, the sharp stones poked at the soles of our shoes. In the center of The Labyrinth was a bench that could hold two people at most. God forbid that we attempted to get to the bench without first walking through the entirety of the maze.

The real beauty, though, was a growth of trees near The Labyrinth that I christened "The Dancing Lady." From an angle, it looked like a woman in a gown being tipped back in the middle of a dance. I fell a little bit in love with her the day that I saw her. Every day, during recess, my friends and I would take bottles of water, scissors, and gloves outdoors and set about working to free her from the tangle of vines and roots that encumbered her beauty. The following months were a blur of strategically cutting branches, arranging vines in patterns, and reacting to several "Code Red!"s, the latter of which meant that poison ivy had been spotted and needed to be uprooted immediately. We ripped out what we thought were "invasive species" that were trying to destroy the Lady with their roots. By the time that we were done with our ministrations, the Dancing Lady was astonishing in her beauty but also hollow. We

had formed an enclave that we could walk inside. The best part of my day, for two years, was sitting inside the Dancing Lady and observing the area around me. Cars zoomed past the gates, birds called above my head, and sometimes a deer could be spotted near the parking lot where the woods were located. The scent of grass and damp soil permeated the air and the buzz of insects never ceased.

The rest of my experience at AMI was not as kind to me as the Dancing Lady was. With each passing day, I could feel myself one step closer to collapsing under the pressure. I was not smart enough. I didn't understand concepts fast enough. I was pruned the way I had trimmed branches that were not appealing to me. I was shaped the way I twisted vines to form braids that I thought were pretty. I was carved out the way I created a cave for me to sit in.

Academy Montessori Internationale fostered a part of me that I wish would have been left to die. An invasive species, like the ones we thought we were pulling out, had taken root inside my body and I have not known peace since. I strive to do better than my best. Since the majority of the kids were *desi* (of Indian descent) I had to stretch myself beyond my abilities to be even slightly appreciated. I continue to do so now. I still have to impress Ms. Stone. I still have to live up to Mr. Melville's expectations. When I get into the college of my dreams, they will think that I owe it all to them. They will be wrong.

I long to know what happened to the child who spent months trimming a tree just because it vaguely resembled a figure. Because I am not her. Now, I drive past the school without looking. It isn't worth my time.

Trenton Sandler

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Lisa Bauman

Category: Flash Fiction

Hibernation

With her ice-cold hands set on the wheel, which melted momentarily to wave at the Westbrooks doing their weekly yard work, the familiar drive blurred by as she approached the concrete slab building. Every bump in the road perfectly avoided as the fall trees flourished overhead, but her colorblind eyes hadn't the faintest clue winter was approaching. She parked squarely in the second spot from the left when a brisk wind fluttered under her nose with smells of a new development next door that stopped before they reached her eyes.

She never knew mouths could be so critical before taking this job. Gaping, seething, judging – every set of teeth she worked with saw the worst in her. She tried not to prick her finger on the canines that glared at her with daggers, but that didn't stop them from drawing blood. She came into this job through a family member, and at first, couldn't even consider leaving her previous. But pushed by money and ease of commute she rethought the offer and changed her mind. That was 15 years ago. After work, she would embark on the leisurely drive back home, left and rights never flipped. On Thursdays, she met an old friend for dinner at the local diner, Old Mary's. She ordered a hamburger with no tomato or onion. They would discuss their weeks and she would tell him about this real dirty tooth that just ate into her and couldn't seem to get clean. An hour or so would pass before they would hug, tip the young waitress a few dollars, and vow to see each other again as soon as possible.

Following every other Thursday meeting, her sputtering car would take her across the stock food for the winter, missing every strewn pothole in the parking lot. Inside, she wandered the desolate rows of the old, family-owned shop, cart slowly filling up. Bright signs flew overhead but she was too focused on her ingredients to notice. In the frozen aisle, meals lined the shelves like bears hiding from the cold. Sitting. Watching. When her usual syrup rebranded, she was filled with vengeance and her morning waffles became forever dry.

It was pulling into her gridlike neighborhood one Thursday, trunk assumingly filled with groceries, when a flashy BMW slammed into her passenger-side door. Flustered, she toed out of the no-longer-pristine car as the BMW sped off, not a moment to get a word between the shrieks of the wheels. Now I don't know what happened next, watching from my den. A phone call to an acquaintance or a tow company? Day to day I saw her, lives so constantly overlapped, and although I never met the woman her pity was felt. We were alone together. Attended the same bars, shopped the same stores – probably supported the same teams. But when the crash happened I knew she had escaped me. The shatter of glass sounded as she stumbled down the street, dead leaves underfoot. It seemed she finally understood winter was coming and was terrified of hibernation.

Isabel Sapp

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Broken Man On A Nameless Highway (Who Are What and What We'll Be)

i. prologue (part one)

When I was three years old, I saw a man get hit by a car.
My mother said to look away.
I didn't.
Should I of?

ii. blood smeared on yellow stripes (part two)

It was on the way back from a trip to my grandmother's
My brother and I were curled in the backseats like lazy cats, crashing from a sugar high
more intense than Pompeii's demise
As we curved around the highway, our car came to a screeching halt
like a panther, my father leaped from the car and prowled to the scene
surveying and securing like the true volunteer firefighter that he was
My mother quickly whispered to us: a man has been hit. Do not look.
Her words left me like the wind
In one ear, out the other, as they say
When she and my father were gone, their desire to help beckoned them to a broken man, I unclicked myself from the
backseat against my brother's weak protests and snuck over the car's console to watch, like the sun peeking over
the horizon.
I do not remember much--I was just a child--but I do remember this:
His chest rattled like a little baby's toy
as he gave a fish-like gape, with
his shattered lungs and porcelain gasps
The blood pooled beneath him
a hot and sticky mattress that clotted in his hair and trickled from his mouth
It was so red against the shale-gray road, against his ghost-pale skin
even darker in the shade of the car that hit him
His bones jutted into an abstract painting that could rival Picasso
a broken masterpiece I could not tear my eyes from
There were so many people watching, like me
Their eyes fixated on him, on his sorrow, on his misery
a woman sobbed, her body shuttering and shivering like she was cold
When the ambulance came, she did not go in with him
I don't even think she knew him
Lovers of tragedy, aren't we?
Moved to tears by it, fascinated and entranced, and yet--
I don't know, I don't know...
I don't know
Help him
that is what my mind told me to do, urging and shoving me forward
yet my feet remained plants, rooted like tree trunks
I did not move, my expression matching the stony glares of Mount Everest
After the police got statements, the ambulance wailed her way to the hospital

my parents came back to the car and I scuttled into my seat before they ever realized
I had left it
That day, I watched a man be reduced to blood, skin, and bone
Is that all we are? All we ever will be?
A sack of meat, held together by a maze of veins and fortresses of organs?
Can we escape it, what makes us?
It's these eternal questions: are we alone? are we more? is there someone there to hear us?
that drive us in all we do
that ignite our fires, douse our spirits
We are just soft creatures with pieces missing on the immortal quest to become whole

iii. I Am, I Was, I Will Be (part three)

Now, let me give a late preface--a conclusion, perhaps, or an analysis--over that story, of the broken man on a nameless highway:

I cannot be certain if this truly happened
my memories are stitched together with the needle and thread of my parents' words
and they never spoke of this
My mind is blooming with ideas, a vine of thought twisting together tales and triumphs
Who is to say I saw this?
Who is to say I imagined it?
My aunt has a similar story from her childhood, of a man struck by a car
I could have easily snatched the story, like a thief in the night
and implanted it into my mind as a steady fact
It is vivid in my memory
bright, vibrant, a sprawling mural, a glorious garden like that of Babylon
yet, so are my dreams in their vivacious wonder, bird-like and swooping through the clouds
Creative, is what they called me

Gifted

Daydreamer

I am always lost in a world of my own creation
a divine trap of my own temptation
bloody wolf teeth snapping and
snarling
dipping into my squashy skin and taking a
bite of me
Dreams take the places of long-lost memories
hazy with the misty candlelight of forlorn songs
missing signs posted, stapled to light posts, but no one has called
Stories, fantastical, real, joined together in blinding grace
sit in the golden thrones of what belongs
crown askew but glimmering, jewels admiring and shimmering
I am Luz Noceda
bubbling and bursting with imagination
but, unlike her, I am still waiting for my Owl House, my old witch in the woods and
friends with pointed ears and mystic powers
I still want to be that American Girl,
an example put on display
a novel written about me
and all I accomplished
Is it selfish of me? to wish to be remembered? to want to hear my name upon the lips of a stranger?
I am Achilles, choosing glory over a long life
and I am Thetis, all the same,
begging for a different
outcome
Would I choose a violent end if it meant a spectacular show?
I don't know
I just hope I am not Paris,

helmet off and alone, pathetic prayers falling from the tip of my tongue
as I scurry like a mouse
fleeing to safety
hated and hated and hated
by everyone I love
though, I fear it

A cowardness coils inside my chest
a viper with venom dripping from its fangs
ready to strike

I am a bystander
a frozen statue
sculpted with eyes that follow
but limbs that never outstretch
never warm

Once, when I was working concessions, sweets designed coldly on the plastic table
a man, sun blazing in his eyes, tottered on a curb, as if on a see-saw, and
fell, banging against the cement and scrapping his
knees

Help him

my mind urged, my fingers twitching
and yet my feet, as they did with another bleeding man on another road, swayed
but never broke into a dance

A different man, one clad in jeans and a baseball cap the color of summer grass
without hesitation, without a thought
was by the fallen man's side in mere
instants

And yet, my eyes remained transfixed, my hands back to counting money, smooth against my callouses
I was Jeff Bezos
watching the injured, green twirling in my fingers, and saying
nothing

What an awful thing to be
someone who could do something yet chooses to stand, still as marble

And yet, here I am, the epitome of it
but I don't want to be

I don't want to be Aaron Burr
waiting and waiting and waiting
but the one moment I act, I--
no

I will be furious as an ever-growing wildfire
burning and blazing with irreverent force
smoldering with ostentatious confidence and doused by
nothing
creating a story of brilliance

I will have my name, my stories, my words, etched into grandquillence
borne into a vast grandness
made for all to hear

I will leave an imprint in the mind of a child
warp how they see the world
unlock the vibrant reality of the realm we live in, much like
the man on the highway did to me

My creativity
will be my destruction and in the
destruction I will
create

Let this conclusion leave you with a flashing story, a starbursting chronicle:
I will not wait

iv. epilogue (part four)

When I was three years old, I saw a man get hit by a car.
My mother said to look away.
I didn't.
Would you?

Jiya Shetty

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Rock Bridge Senior High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Danielle Johnson

Category: Critical Essay

The Numbers Don't Lie

When my homeroom teacher asked me what I wanted to be after high school, I told her with confidence that I would be a relationship consultant. It wasn't the whopping 35k a year in salary or enticing one-star reviews on Indeed.com which incited my desire to become a love guru. It was my 100% success rate in the romances of others around me. 100% success rate in the destruction of their relationships that is. After I advised a friend to send his girlfriend a pick-up line, she broke up with him right before prom. Similarly, when I told a teammate to slide a handwritten love poem into her crush's locker, she found its shreds in the recycling bin. One could say that I'm not cut out to be the love guru I've always wanted to be - because the numbers just don't add up. After all, you wouldn't watch a movie that scored 0% on Rotten Tomatoes. Or, bet on the last-seeded football team to win the Super Bowl. Our affection for numbers is astonishing. Renowned journalist Rupert Cornwell states, "9 out of 10 Americans love statistics." However, the problem arises when our obsession with cold-hard numbers goes too far, leading to a blind trust in statistics. Data analyst Bernardita Calzon states "While numbers don't [always] lie, they can... be used to mislead with half-truths." And this brings me to my primary concern, In today's data-driven society, statistics have been weaponized to justify false narratives thus harming individuals and hindering meaningful change. So, let's first, examine our unhealthy affair with numbers. Next, we will look at how the abuse of statistics can lead to a toxic misrepresentation of situations and people. Before finally, discovering how we can try to mend this relationship and reevaluate the place statistics have in our lives.

Whether it be the decadal US census surveys or daily weather forecasts, statistics make up American infrastructure just as much as roads and bridges do. Today, we are practically drowning in numbers with terabytes of data at our fingertips. This is not inherently bad, after all, data has aided breakthroughs in everything from aerospace to psychology. But the issue occurs when those numbers lead us down the wrong path. When we start to falsely equate statistics to the complete truth, we fall into a trap called the statistical fallacy. This occurs when statistics are misused to assert a falsehood. Whether it be the infamous correlation instead of causation, misrepresentations in sample size, or bias tainting the facts, statistical fallacies happen more often than not. But when statistics start to misconstrue situations and dehumanize people, this relationship becomes a contemporary Romeo and Juliet.

The abuse of statistics permeates our classrooms, hospitals, and everything in between. Just look at commonly held conceptions of the American school system. From youtube videos with passerbys failing to find the United States on a map or viral TikTok challenges of people slathering their hair in gorilla glue, America has been categorized as pretty dumb. But one of the biggest complaints about our stupidity stems from students' performances on international standardized tests. In 2018, the U.S. placed 30th in math, well below the global average. Not to mention that America's scores have fallen behind several Asian countries. In response to slipping international test scores, the U.S. Secretary of Education stated that "Americans need to wake up to this educational reality—instead of napping at the wheel while emerging competitors prepare their students for economic leadership," (Carnoy). But these remarks underplay the progress being done in the US education system. According to Mark Schneider, some top-ranked counties such as China deliberately skew their international test scores by cherry-picking wealthy provinces to test, even if that only represents the privileged 13% of the population. In contrast, America tests a diverse group of students who range from not only the most privileged but also those from low-income and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. A Stanford report explains that the achievement of U.S. disadvantaged students has been rising rapidly over time, while it's been falling in other high-achieving countries. However, flatlining test scores blinded American policymakers to this progress, so instead of sustainable improvements in our educational system, there were quick fixes designed to climb rankings, which resulted in reduced autonomy of curriculum for teachers are more stress for the administration of schools. When we blindly believe statistics without digging any deeper, we are misled to believe oversimplified and exaggerated conclusions, leading to a misguided sense of the situation.

Statistical fallacies don't just debilitate the educational system, they also can cause complications in the medical

field. In 1998, British physician Dr. Andrew Wakefield released research stating that the vaccine for measles caused developmental autism in young children. To support his claim, he described that 67% of the children he studied had developed autism in relation to the vaccine. What he didn't include in his findings was his use of a biased sample size of only 12 developmentally delayed children and his suspicious financial ties to anti-vaccination businesses (Rao). Although his paper was retracted for misrepresenting data the weight of the numbers he cited caused irreparable damage. His research resulted in an immediate public health scare that saw vaccination rates dip drastically. Even the plethora of credible follow-up research disproving Wakefield's study could not undo the doubt seeded in our society because of these statistics. Today vaccine skepticism is higher than ever with some referring to this fallacious study as justification against vaccination. The impacts are astronomical, especially during a global pandemic where getting vaccinated against Covid-19 is one of the only ways to protect yourself and those around you.

The harms of weaponized statistics also trickle down to a personal level. Statistics can be used to vindicate false stereotypes and belittle individuals' experiences. It was a warm September day when 15-year-old Brianna Stuart accidentally crashed her bike into a Chevy Cruze. The next events were all but sunny. In a few minutes, police officers hauled the girl off the ground, shoved her against a building to handcuff her, and pepper-sprayed her, all while she sobbed and cursed and screamed "I can't breathe!" (VanSickle). Unfortunately, others have not been so "lucky." Other cases of police brutality resulted in death. The commonality between these stories was that the victims were all African Americans, attacked not only by discriminatory police forces but also by the institutionalized fallacy that "African Americans are criminals." What is most alarming is that many use the statistics that 38% of inmates are black to reinforce this stereotype. When these numbers are seen by people ignorant of the idea of systemic racism in America, these statistics can be seen as a reason to believe that the color of your skin has an inherent correlation to criminal activity. In fact, I have come across this phenomenon all too often while living in the midwest where certain rural cities are echo chambers for propaganda about minorities. When supposed facts are misconstrued to justify prejudice, it produces more hate. The spread of this belief further exacerbates racial disparities not only in the criminal justice system but also in everyday life, where the parents of young black boys and girls give their children "the talk," about what to do when the police are not there to protect you but to unfairly hurt you. Statistics erase the humanity of our society. They boil us down to numbers and generalizations. Still, we wholeheartedly accept them without question.

So, it is time to mend our broken relationship with statistics. Solving the problem doesn't mean cutting statistics out of our society. However, we must change our mindset when approaching statistics if we wish to improve our relationship with them. First, we should confirm that the numbers we consume are actually accurate. This means spotting statistical fallacies by avoiding overly biased sites or those with radically different numbers compared to reputable sources. Second, we must start asking ourselves more profound questions. Question why and how the number came to be, instead of readily accepting the statistic as the whole truth. Try to understand the deeper history behind the situation to see whether the statistic supports a logical conclusion. Finally, we must diversify the types of media we read. This entails not only trying to look at sources that rely on authority but also listening to the viewpoints and stories of those around us to get a fuller picture of the situation. Research has proven that these stories help us empathize, thus evoking greater understanding in the listener (Zak). We need to start emphasizing context, not just content, in order for real change to happen.

Even though I don't have a great track record when it comes to relationship advice, I can say one thing for certain: It is time that we break free from our toxic relationship with statistics. We have to realize that just because the numbers don't always lie, it doesn't mean they are always telling the truth. Only then, can we start to take steps to fight injustice in our communities.

Jiya Shetty

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Rock Bridge Senior High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Danielle Johnson

Category: Poetry

Lost Dreams

When the wind howls
And the heavens' raw anger pours
The Little Brown Girl seeks refuge
Under the shelter of a desk
Next to her lies a hearth
Whose raging flames
Gleams in her bright jeweled eyes
As she sprawls among a scatter of paints
Like a rainbow hiding beneath the storm

Brush clutched in her fingers
Strokes of color bloom across a thin blank slate
The melding of azure into violet
Washing her emotions away
The pitter-patter of the rain
And the tick-tock of an ancestral clock
Accompanied the scratching of her incoherent scribbles
Providing a symphony recognized only by her ears

But then the sun would come out
Casting its facade of eternal felicity
Still, where there is light there is shadow
Two looming figures of expectations
Weighing on the Girl
They coaxed her to crawl out from her hideout
And sit straight-backed on a chair
Until the familiar weight of her favorite stubby pastel
Was replaced by a #2 pencil
And her worn leather-bound sketchbook's home on her shelf
Was stolen by a crisp-paged textbook
Whose stale words
Reflected in her glazed eyes

And when The Little Brown Girl
Could no longer be called so...
She lived on
With a dull countenance
As a "content" adult living in the "real world"
With a "respectable" career
But when it rained
The drops panged deep in her heart
From her forgotten self
Which held a crayon

Adam Spree

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sandra Olive

Category: Critical Essay

Power to the Pebble: Analyzing Regressive Power Systems in *The Fifth Season*

Power to the Pebble: Analyzing Regressive Power Systems in *The Fifth Season*

Throughout the novel *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin chronicles the complex experience of a singular figure existing under different guises as a protection mechanism. Growing up in a society that frowns upon her kind, known as orogenes or by the slur *rogga*, the character, who adopts the names of Damaya, Syenite, and Essun in various stages of her life, battles an internal struggle with the labels placed upon her. Over the course of the novel, Essun illustrates immense growth, not only in her power and control as an orogene but also in her autonomy and introspection. However, an organized system of power over the orogenes simply referred to as the Fulcrum stands at the center of all orogeny in the Stillness, working to subjugate, control, and even kill any orogene working against the interests and whims of the upper class.

At the heart of the Stillness's society lie three tablets given the blanket name of the stonelore, however, at multiple points in the novel, discrepancies are discussed and discovered regarding these so-called "truths" and "principles" that guide societal understanding of concepts like the seasons, orogenes, and leadership. Primarily, it seems these systems of truth work to benefit the ruling class of the Yumenes while degrading orogenes as stains and curses on family bloodlines. This concept, labeled "othering," involves powerful entities or societal structures condemning lesser groups to designations "in a reductionist way which ascribe[s] problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups" (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300). This practice especially holds true when these ruling classes use their power to craft further systems of oppression and hindering, such as the aforementioned Fulcrum and even legislation like the *Declaration on the Rights of the Orogenically Afflicted* which only strengthens these regressive characteristics further. In N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, the author reveals that oppressive power systems, such as those perpetuated by the stonelore, solely lead to scrutiny and scorn by those directly affected, in this instance, orogenes like Essun. By framing orogenes as the monsters of society, these systems serve to reduce them to the abominations they warn against: driven by pure emotion and hatred, demonstrating a societal tendency to confine unknown and feared concepts into a singular label for ease, diminishing any opportunity for variation.

In the first stage of Essun's life, she goes by her birth name, Damaya; however, she is instead referred to as "DamaDama Strongback" by her cruel mother as a label to both dehumanize her and show her segregation from the rest of her family. Traditionally, a strongback is often viewed as nothing more than a slave utilized for manual labor as a form of payment for being a "member" of the community instead of a commensal. Damaya's mother frequently reveals her hatred towards the fact that her daughter introduced a supposed "curse" into her family bloodline. At one point, she even goes so far as to state that Damaya "had hidden it from them...hidden everything," further claiming that Damaya "was really a monster" and "that was what monsters did" (Jemisin 31). Although no context is provided in the novel at this point as to why Damaya's mother possesses such hostility towards her, it is obvious that orogeny is generally regarded as dangerous and shameful for all individuals involved. However, Damaya is merely a little girl who is treated as little more than a burden by her family, damaging both her perception of the world and herself. At such an early stage in her life, her only source of truth and understanding is derived from her parents, so when she is taught that what she can do and what she can feel is a mistake, she begins to feel worthless and outcast, losing a grip on the shreds of emotion that still occupy her thoughts. Consequently, Damaya is fully aware of the fact that, above all, her mother does not resent her; rather, "she fears Damaya" for the power she holds, and in response, her mother employs the only tool at her disposal: neglect (Jemisin 33). Within Damaya's mind, she can solely exist as her mother's disappointment, the child lost to the animosity of orogeny, preventing her from being a kid.

Damaya's descent into austerity is later shown during her time at the Fulcrum, where she is constantly forced to meticulously control both her mannerisms and emotions as appeasement to the Fulcrum leadership. Her day is routinely organized, with meals, training, chores, and even free time all carefully planned out to ensure maximum efficiency and control. In the words of her instructors, "You are representatives of us all" developing their later

statement that explains "*We hurt you so you'll do the rest of us no harm*" as a means to justify the young orogenes' mistreatment and strict oversight (Jemisin 192-193). Quite literally, orogenes such as Damaya bear the brunt of the pain and isolation of society in order to improve it for everyone else. The truth, bolstered by the dominant class's manipulation of stonelore, establishes orogenes as a focal point for hatred and fear. It seems that not even the seasons, which have proven to be the bane of multiple societies throughout history, carry as much taboo and anxiety as orogenes, preventing them from being anything other than something to hide from and fear.

Later in Essun's life, when she adopts the name Syenite, which is derived from the gemstone's resilience and strength, her perception of society and reality, in general, appears to be slightly altered. While she retains the ideals and lessons ingrained in her by her time at the Fulcrum, there seems to be a hint of independence and newfound freedom not exemplified previously. In particular, her mentor at the time, Alabaster, seems to be the primary force behind this movement away from superficiality and tradition towards scorn and resentment. Through his teachings, Syenite comes to realize that systems like the Fulcrum either possess them like commodities to be bought and sold or they "have to hide and be hunted down like dogs" as a means to prevent them from turning into "monsters" that "kill everything" (Jemisin 123). Once again the comparison of orogenes to monsters is drawn, and although Alabaster uses it as a form of subtle protest against the label, he recognizes its universal applicability to all orogenes regardless of their history and identity. The Fulcrum itself contributes to this label by isolating orogenes from the general population in order to keep their powers hidden. While it is fair to assume that orogenes would still be discriminated against without the Fulcrum, removing any traces of orogeny from society and historical records, severs the potential for empathetic connection between stills and orogenes, halting progression towards any future equality or inclusivity of orogenes.

After many years of heartbreak, death, and destruction, Essun stands as the sole member of her family remaining in the community she was adopted into following her time on the island of Meov. Having lost her son Uche to her husband Jija, whose fear and hatred of orogenes resulted in the murder of their infant son, and with her only daughter Nassun on the run with her husband, Essun feels emotions all too familiar to those she experienced in her adolescent years. To quell such powerful emotions, she opts to leave her community, both for the sake of its people and for the sake of potentially being outed for her orogeny. However, in this endeavor, she is nearly shot and killed by a guard's crossbow, sparking all of the unbridled and pent-up emotion and frustration from years of trauma and abuse. Essun first describes this feeling as a mere reproach from her inner voice, "the voice of [her] conscience, deep and male," which originates "from another life" altogether (Jemisin 56). This metaphysical voice seems to be the embodiment of her guardian Schaffa, but as it is made clear, it seems to be a voice of ingrained teaching rather than a voice of rational thought, as it simply states, "*Naughty, naughty*," when appearing in Essun's mind (Jemisin 56). Although Essun seems to reject her past and the life she was forced to live by the Fulcrum, it is impossible for her to escape her inner feelings of worthlessness. Essun feels the need to be someone's disappointment, whether it be her mother's for tainting her bloodline, Alabaster's for killing his only *real* child, or Schaffa's for betraying the teachings of both himself and the Fulcrum. This cycle of trauma keeps Essun stuck as a being of power and emotion rather than a human being.

As a result of years upon years of trauma, guilt, abuse, and hardship, Essun is pushed past her breaking point. Similarly to the description of the voice inside her head, Essun reiterates that "something raw and furious and cold" has been awoken within her, and her sudden transformation can only be described as "like a heart attack," both unexpected and deadly (Jemisin 56-57). While it is clear that Essun has gone through a metamorphosis from the shy, anxious Damaya, it is impossible to deny that she lacks any lasting impact or trauma from the way societal power structures have identified and treated her. From being told she was the monster to finally occupying her role during her departure from her community, it is obvious that the ultimate goal of the truth perpetuated by the stone lore was achieved in this instance. Orogenes themselves are not monsters; they are merely turned into them after years of conditioning and teaching to believe they are. Indirectly, the very falsehoods the stonelore warns against and has developed in society regarding orogenes are only created by its very existence, demonstrating the duality present in the tablets' impact on members of society.

All in all, whether it be Damaya's classification as a worthless stain on her family's history, Syenite's attempts to break from her teachings that absorb her life, or Essun's pent-up rage that results in the destruction of her community, the so-called truth conveyed and supported by the stonelore serves solely to affirm the negative labels created for orogenes by society. As a result, orogenes begin to fit the characteristics of these labels as monsters since it is all they know they can be. Society forces these individuals to assimilate into the lifestyle selected for them as a way to ease their burdens and create a singular source of hatred that would otherwise detract from efficiency and order. While orogeny is technically not the same thing as race in *The Fifth Season*, when analyzing the societal structures that impact them, it echoes many present-day systems of power perpetuated by history, causing things like institutional racism, wage gaps based on gender and race, and misinformation among educational resources. N.K. Jemisin's lessons are all too important in analyzing how our understanding of the world may be influenced by these

systems, and how they can be amended and abolished to support a more equitable and fair society for all.

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Riley Strait

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

All-American Adolescence

Tomorrow, I will worry about the future.
But today, I wallow in the past.

Tomorrow, I will be 16 and trying to remember
if the derivative of arcsin is the square root of
one-minus-u-squared or *u-squared-minus-one*
in the denominator, and I'll think it's the first,

but I won't be sure—I'll just choose C.

But today, I am six and rumbling in the elevator
of a hotel in some state a 13-hour car ride away
for summer vacation, and all I think about
is hotel breakfast and pool.

Tomorrow, I will get home past dinnertime and
make a list of the homework I need to do and
try to see which assignment might be negotiable
because there's just not enough time.

But today, I wear my light-up tennis shoes and
go to Target at opening, before school, to buy the
newest video game, and the only thing I need to do
is play it today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I will wake up middle-aged in a 16-year-old body,
limping out of bed with left-foot pain, an old injury flaring up.
I'll march sullenly off to school like a disillusioned soldier to war,
worn down from the lengthy battle against American education.

But today, I am stuck at six and wish to fast-forward time—
but because I can't, I plan a life with childlike gravitas of all I want and more:
I play air saxophone, sketch my next masterpiece, write my great American novel.
Today, I will while away time, wanting to be 16.

Tomorrow, I will wake up a stranger in my body,
and I will get out of bed and squint at the mirror,
and think *When was the last time I shaved?* and
Since when have I needed to shave?

Tomorrow, I will realize that Today is gone.

Micah Tate

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marceline High School, Marceline, MO

Educator: Julie Sheerman

Category: Short Story

Jump

I'm not entirely sure how I got into this situation. I know it started with the fight, or maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe I was just doomed from the start to always end up here; standing at the top of some bridge in the middle of nowhere, my phone on silent, and a note in my jacket pocket tied to the rusted railing. I barely even remember writing the thing, just a blurred vision of me scribbling characters onto a piece of notebook paper with a pen just about out of ink. I'm starting to think maybe I'm running out of ink. I look to the rails below me; it sure is quite the drop down. I hear the distant train roaring its grating horn as it bores around the bend. I might not be able to tell exactly how I got here, but I know what I'm here for. Hoisting myself over the safety banister, I release my final breath. I jump.

The warm light enters the room as my body is enveloped by a cold chill. The air smells sanitary and bleak; alcohol wipes and bleach make such a distinct odor. I don't hear much just yet, as there's something blocking my ears. I go to reach for my face and am suddenly grabbed by a large, gloved hand. I hear faint sobbing. I think it might be my own. My ears clear out as I continue to sob and drain my sinuses of their burdensome snot.

"It's a boy!" the first words I'm able to recognise.

Again the room is full of sobs, but this time it's probably from others. I see a strange woman lying on the bed beside the man holding me in his plastic-covered arms. Something about her is familiar, but she just looks so strange to me. A man is sitting beside her, holding her hand and crying by her side. The two share a warm embrace as I'm whisked away to a small room with a tub and a prepared swaddling towel. I close my eyes as I'm laid into the cold basin, then open them to new scenery.

I'm in some kind of... kitchen? The walls around me are painted high in beige, this contrasts harshly with the dark oak siding and cabinets. I smell something sweetly sour, and feel some kind of warm mush in my hands. Looking down, I see I'm very high above the ground. There's some kind of tray before me, holding me back into my chair. It's all lime green and white. I think they're supposed to be colors I enjoy, but they just hurt my eyes. I look around the room and see no one near me; I'm all alone in this room, and my hands are covered in some kind of yellow mush that I must have been eating. I'm not sure why, but this loneliness scares me. I begin to wail, screaming like an animal trapped in a cage. No one comes.

At some point when I close my eyes to cry, I open them again to newer scenery. I'm in some kind of small room. The walls are still that ugly beige color. I'm sitting on a couch that smells of cigarettes and dust, with a man in front of me wearing some kind of suit. He looks upset. I'm wearing some kind of cotton shirt, the tag on the back irritating my neck each time I breathe. My shorts are dipping just below my knees, stained and worn.

The man in the suit asks me, "Do you want to talk to me for a bit?"

I nod politely; I'm still not entirely sure what's going on, but I feel like I know what to do.

The man continues, "We had some reports that your parents might be hurting you, is that correct?"

I know how to answer, because they taught me exactly what to say, "No sir, I'm just a bit clumsy and get bruises too often," the words feel tight in my throat, and I almost struggle to force out the last bit.

"Do they ever hit you?" his eyes glaring deeply into mine.

"I get spankings every once in a while, but only when I'm bad," I think this is the right way to answer.

"Are you sure that's all? You seem to have some bruises on your legs there," he gestures towards my lower leg, covered in a mix of browned greens and purples, "Looks like you've got yourself a pretty nasty one there."

"I tripped when I was playing soccer the other day, my leg hit a branch," again, I've practiced this answer.

"You sure bud? That looks like a big bruise," he's catching on to me.

"Big branch," I reply, crossing my fingers.

We go back and forth like this for probably half an hour, and before I know it, I've blinked and gone somewhere else. I open my eyes to the fluorescent lights of a high school hallway. Someone's in front of me, holding my

shoulders and banging my head against the painted brick. He's saying something about his girlfriend, but all I hear is the throbbing of my own heartbeat in my ears. My blood is pumping, my head is pounding, then I black out.

I'm in the living room of my apartment, and my girlfriend just got off work. She stomps into the room and throws her bag onto the floor. I feel my blood rushing through my body and my breaths quicken. She walks into the room and is immediately scolding me. Something about laundry, and dishes. I can't hear her well enough to respond. I've already downed an entire bottle of some cheap whiskey I snatched off the shelf of a gas station nearby. The room is spinning and my head just keeps on pounding.

She hits me. It's not the first time, but this time it was hard. She hit way harder than she had any other time. I feel the warm blood fall down my nose and onto my lips. I can't even think at this point, the world is just blank. I stand up and grab my jacket off the hook, she stays screaming into my ear the entire time. I check the pockets, yep, the note is still there. A little slip of folded paper, slightly damp in the corner from spilled whiskey and tears. Her voice swirls around my head as I finally pull my sleeves over my arms and leave.

I walk aimlessly through the empty streets. I put my dry lips between my teeth and peel off the papery skin. Eventually, I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket and go to check the screen; it's her. I switch my phone to silent, ignoring the pain in my chest that rises up as I see her profile photo's fake smile. The phone stops buzzing, but her picture remains on the screen. I've made it to the bridge now, and the cool air chills my damp face.

I'm not entirely sure how I got here; the alcohol has blurred my vision and the tears welled in my eyes aren't helping. I might not know how I got here, but I know what I'm here for. I hoist myself over the safety banister, and jump. The cool air rushes past me, and I open my eyes to a white, sanitary scented room. Alcohol wipes and bleach make such a distinct odor.

Noel Taussig

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: City of Fountains School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Idean Bindel, Brandi McFadden

Category: Poetry

Human

(timeline)

Once upon a time,
peace was a warm star
in the midst of an unknown universe

Even further back,
calmness was a hot cup of tea
sweetened with honey
while safety was a tight hug from your mother
in her candlelit kitchen

In another age,
belonging was a book you read over and over
until you memorized every chapter, every word, every mark of punctuation
Letting go was a fresh sheet

Yesterday,
hope was walking in a new door
Today,
I am the fingertips of growth
swimming through the tenderness of my own heart
swimming through the tides of anticipation and tears
Always
becoming more
Always with each breath
Always evolving more and more
Human

(i wonder)

I wonder why everyone doesn't take the time to sit and wonder
Why true love makes it hard to breathe; why people hate the thunder
It is her only way of brushing by
I wonder why I'm blushing; how you make my heart inflate
Tell me, why humans strive for such power and empery
I wonder which is better for the recipient; forgiveness or empathy
Why saying goodbye is so normalized; yet one of the most excruciating things anyone can do
And I wonder if it's ever too late
Melancholy, déjà vu
Antsy, I wonder about my fate
What are we without thought?
Merely just complex organisms?
I wonder; will I ever stop wondering?

I cannot
Maybe somehow all this wondering will improve my acumen
For without wondering,
None of us
Would be
Human

(present)
Why is it?
Why is it that I am
Surrounded, enveloped, swaddled in love and liveliness
Right here and now
But my only thoughts
So yonderly circulating around the idea
That these precious moments
Will soon be over for eternity
Never experienced again
Drifted far away into the universe of our own subconscious
Nothing but a memory, an old photograph
Perhaps being present is the key
To being content

Maybe one day,
I'll spot a reminder of these days, moments, memories
Inhale someone's old perfume
Recall a forgotten inside joke
Maybe, it will evoke
This treasure trove of feeling and nostalgia
Maybe, being present is
Soaking in each moment
Appreciating the smell of pavement after the rain
And the last empty seat on a train
Really, no need to explain
Every little mortal thing
Because just maybe
We are simply meant to be
Present and appreciative

Cold hands, frigid feet
Winter will pass and melt the sleet
For now I will zoom in
On the warmth of my polyester sweater
The warmth of my own heart
Right now,
I am everything
But most importantly
I am
Human

Molly Thompson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Katie Kilcullen

Category: Short Story

The Cave

1

Did something get lost in translation? I do not recall how I got here. I was simply passing through, I never meant to get lost. The path I walked did not seem treacherous at first, and the wind never turned on me. Perhaps I veered astray, or perhaps the path was simply not as straightforward as I had initially thought.

Whatever the case is, I am now stuck here in this cave. It is dark and cold, with teeth running down the floors and up the ceilings. Its whistling maw had lured me in until I was too deep to find the way out, and now all I hear is my own breath and the endless dripping of the teeth.

There is no life down here. I thought there would be bats and other dark creatures, but I am completely alone. There is nothing else here to comfort me. I could hear the song of the cave when it seduced me here, but now its voice has abandoned me.

Drip

Drip

Drip

It is uneven, and it grates on my nerves. The irritation flares up in me, and I grow restless. I wonder briefly if it is a good thing, now that there is some light in the cave, until I realize that the fire will spread smoke into my lungs and kill me. I breathe deeply in a vain attempt to put it out.

The fire disappears, but embers remain ever waiting for their moment to light up again. I let them fester, and the bitterness grows.

I feel bitter towards the walls of the cave, encasing me here, To the uneven floor I lie on that denies me any comfort. I am weary from traveling for so long, and my back longs for a soft down to relax upon. My bitterness is for the teeth, those stalagmites and stalactites that stand severely over me.

Most of it falls upon me, however. The sour taste in the air is directed at my failure to avoid this. Even if the path *is* what led me here, I should have known better than to follow it.

The embers burn on.

2

I do not recall how I got here. ~~But~~ I? I struggle to remember even stepping into this tomb. I do not remember seeing an entrance, I just opened my eyes and found the damp darkness.

When did the path begin to twist? It was a moving thing, writhing as I stepped upon it until I tripped and fell into this. It slithered and forced me to stumble and lurch.

And the wind? What was the wind doing as I staggered along? It was laughing, blowing me this way and that way while I struggled to keep my hair in place.

Pushed into the woods I was scraped and battered along the harsh bark of trees. Thorns tore at my skin and clothes as I wandered barefoot, only vaguely aware that the snake was still at my feet.

A mist came upon the air as the sun set and the land became barren and dead. The snake hissed and urged me forward. I used to encounter people along my way, but this graveyard is empty.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the snake had left me and there was no more path to follow. The mist had hardened into stone and my tears fell off of pointed pillars surrounding me.

3

The embers have finally died out, leaving only a faint taste of smoke on the air. I am exhausted, and lie in a heap upon the stone. My limbs feel heavier than they ever have, and a fear of dying here swells in my chest.

Panicked, I muster what strength I have and pull myself off of the ground, my bones whining in protest.

I am not in an enclosed room, and I step unsteadily towards a greater expanse of the cave. Somehow, it seems to grow darker in this direction, but I have nowhere else to go and the terror of death drives me forward.

I wander for a time, past chasms and canyons. After what feels like ages I see a light up ahead. I go towards it and see that it is coming from a hole in the ceiling that allows the sun to shine down from way up.

I revel in it, smiling upwards and start slowly spinning in circles. So yellow, so bright. Even all the way down here.

My foot lands in warm water and I jolt in surprise. Looking down, I see a large underwater lake expanding well past the radius of the sunlight.

The heat of the water is such a welcome reprieve from the chill of the cave that I take a few steps deeper and kneel down, the water encasing my legs.

My eyes tilt back up towards the skylight and I stare at it a while longer, unblinking. It is a beautiful thing, the sun, for its light to travel so far deep into the depths of despair. But it seems so far away, the hole is too thin, and too long.

My eyes drift down to the water, which has stilled. A broken girl stares up at me from the sheen, dried blood from thorny scrapes littering her arms and face. I weep for her, and a tear falls into the lake, rippling the water.

As the rings spread out the mirror shakes, and to my horror, the reflection shifts. I am looking upon a snake, with venom dripping from her teeth. My breathing shakes as I reach an unsteady hand up to grope my face, wondering if it was made of flesh or scales. But my terror increases when I see that instead of fingers attached to my palms, there are long, twisting barbed thorns.

I am hyperventilating, as I begin to finally grasp why I am here, and my breath comes out in the same whistling tune that pushed me into coming here.

The wind! I realize, panic growing as the truth dawns on me. There was no wind, it was just me. A hoarse noise from my own throat. And it is growing louder, more choked as I stare longer at my warped reflection. And the thorns—they were of my own making. The forest I traveled through had grown from the seeds of my fear. What had I even been following? Was there even a path to begin with? I could have sworn there was a trail that someone else had laid out, baiting me to follow.

I was wrong. It had always been a creature of my own making.

Molly Thompson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Katie Kilcullen

Category: Poetry

Poetry Collection

The Blame of Eurydice

I asked him to do it but he Wouldn't
Could he? The one who doomed us was You
I told them there is nothing left that I Have
They only mocked: What's done is Done.
But what about them I say, what about The—
No. The love they have is not enough. I guess we're the Same.
And Spring? Is there any hope left In Her?
I walked for so long and all that came was the ruining of my Shoes
The man had said to me: go down, go In.
Those three women mocked me: look at Her!
Yeah, look at me as I shrivel inside my Skin

Nothing for me, so nothing for You
There is nothing that we Can Have
Don't speak of Your Principles!
It was never a question of if, but When
I wanted what You've Got
The power and work that makes A Bellyful
The paradise of work was warm, But...
But it never receded, that Hunger
It tortures me, with all the pain it Has
What a way to go! What A Way
I thought that I'd walk straight out With You
Except for love, the king had all There Is
I thought that you could lead the way, alas No.
How foolish to think that it was the truth you were Telling
"What is it?" I had asked you, *What?*
When doubt becomes too much you'll turn! You're Gonna!
Now that I am dead again, there is nothing left to Do

Can I ever go back into the sun? When?
This game of poker tricked me into laying out all The Chips
Now I and every one of my fellows stuck deep Are Down
Way down.
It's a sad song.

Library of Life

I live within a library

The walls are stacked high with books
Stone pillars hold up the ceiling
Spiraling staircases lead to the upper and lower levels
Within aisles you can find hidden texts
Tomes of knowledge waiting to be beheld
I can hide too, in nooks within the shelves
Hole up with a book 'til I want to emerge
The doors to the library are wide open
People Come and people Go
They Come to mingle, read and find
Mingle with others, and with me
Read a novel, and hide away
Find an epiphany or two, a purpose
They Go to wrangle, feed and mind
Wrangle the turmoils not in this library
Feed themselves, and stay alive
Mind of the flesh, fend for yourself
But those who do not leave
We search our hearts and there we find
The most secret tomes of all

Thunderstorm

She is a powerful beast
Her temperament is matched by no other
You see her coming, and go indoors
She winds her way through the land
Her booming voice can be heard for miles
That flashing glare of her eyes cannot be mistaken
She inspires fear and beauty to all who behold her
Her very presence darkens the sky
And though she ravages, rages and ruins
Though she plights, pillages, and plunders
She comes with such woeful tears
That the path she makes is rejuvenated
Dying plants and animals live in her wake
The sun shines out all the brighter
She calms down and we see another flash
Color gleams and people lift their heads
Smiles come, as her rainbow delights the sky

Falling Sky

When does the sky fall?
It falls when the oceans rise, and stars crown the moon.
Our eyes burst into nothingness as limbs become limp and useless.
The night comes, and darkness cloaks all that we know.
The stars disappear and the moon is shrouded.
The night is coming for us.

The Night is coming to wash away the day
To empty our vision so that we cannot see what was there
It falls in secret, the sky, when we do not watch
When our eyes are closed and we are blinded

All of the struggles and falls are omitted
The light is fading away

The light is fading so we can be unseeing
Darkness is not something that can be seen
It is the disappearance of sight, not a new sight
Anything can hide when we are not looking
Everything hides when the whole world is night
Beware of things that hide

Beware of what lurks under the dusk
That gloom which conceals the falling sky
Open eyes can see that there are no clouds
Just the lids of other eyes, refusing to lift and look
That which hides cannot be stopped
Nothing can hide from open eyes

Nothing can obscure the falling fractures
The sky is always visible to those who look
We can lift up our arms and hold it still
Assembled there is no pain or punishment for Atlas
We can open our eyes and save the sky
For it is falling

Glorious Beauty

Pounding at the doorstep of our hearts
Reaching deep into our souls
Raising up the light of the sky
Holding 'loft the world so high
We can never compare
Such beauty will always be there
Diving deep to vales in glory
No tears will ever bring justice
To the beauty that will reign ever supreme
It sings out mighty fortitude
My bones quake at its very sight
What power has eternally been!

If I take a moment I can breathe it in
The sun, the water, the trees
Grass that pours out beneath my feet
Light passing through a canopy
Towers of irreplaceable wood stretch upwards
Wind rustles leaves green and brown
That wind goes on and on to the heavens
And there they *fly*
Birds that soar upon the mount of air
Ascending higher and higher to their domain
Outstretched feathers spread across the sky
Each beat of their wings a beat of drums
A noble song they sing out with pride
To rival all foes of theirs with such *beauty*

That is to which none can compare
We tread upon the ground
Joyous at times we walk
Through meadows and forests

Where flowers blossom and bloom
Uplifted to face their petals towards the sun
Colors ooze out from their stems
But the road can warp into hills
Steep slopes we climb through bitter chill
Nerves alight within our minds
A river rapidly picks up pace
Its current unyielding and swift
We see its path and fear becomes excitement
Adrenaline courses through our veins as we see it
There before us with utter power and beauty
Gracing the world with its magnificent sight
The river is flowing, flowing onwards
Gushing forwards with vigor 'til we cannot see it
Ripping itself onward until it falls

Sun glistens off the waterfall as it cascades downward
Crystalline water pours into a mighty loch
The birds are seen in its reflective sheen
For such glories to be seen in the sky
To be seen here too in the water before us
Our chests swell to be privy to such a beauty
Emotions flow upwards within us
We run to the edge of the cliff
Our frenzied excitement grows with each step
Bewildered wonder fills us with an inexplicable lightness
And upon reaching that cliff it boils over
Awe leaves us speechless and gaping
Overlooking what millennia have forged so gallantly
Cliffs that tower over distances so vast
Their rocky expanses encompass the land
Crested with fields and sunlight
Plumes of clouds roll across the sky
The air that fills our lungs is strength itself
The strength of this land that *pounds* into me with glory

Molly Thompson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Katie Kilcullen

Category: Critical Essay

Macbeth: A Greek Tragedy

The story of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is one that ventures deep into the psychological undoing of a man caught up in his own paranoia. From the beginning of the tale, Macbeth's pride and arrogance is revealed, and from that point on, it only grows. It appears as though the deeds of the Three Witches and Hecate were the primary cause of Macbeth's hubris. Their words were what filled Macbeth with such confidence that his rule would last forever, even through the deranging consuming sense of guilt and the suicide of his wife. While battling Macduff, Macbeth references heavily the prophecies given to him by the Three Witches. His confidence dissipated upon his duel with Macduff when he discovered that the witches had tricked him and played upon his human weakness. The story of Macbeth is one that centers around many Greek mythological themes, including the depravity of women and the inclusion of hubris in a protagonist.

The witches in *Macbeth* consist of the Three Witches and their mistress, Hecate. In Greek Mythology, Hecate is the goddess of witchcraft, so it is no wonder that Shakespeare had her make an appearance in a play heavily influenced by witches. Upon reading the script of *Macbeth*, one can discover many more references to Greek mythology and, as such, Roman mythology, though not as direct. For example, the similarities between Lady Macbeth and Pandora are undeniable. Pandora was the first human woman, and she unleashed all evils into the world. Similarly, Lady Macbeth was the first human woman to make an entrance in *Macbeth*, and she was the one who planted the idea of murder into Macbeth's ear, even comparing him to "the poor cat i' th' adage" (1.7.46). In doing this, Lady Macbeth preyed upon his doubt in the witches' words and made him feel foolish for not having already killed the king. Greek mythology often had a negative standpoint on women: Pandora released all evil, Hecate was evil, Circe was evil, Apathe was evil, and many other women in Greek myths were depicted as malicious. Apathe's characteristics as the goddess of deceit are even reflected in the Three Witches as their main goal was to deceive Macbeth to his doom.

In Shakespeare's play, Hecate makes a reference to the river of woe and misery, Acheron. Though a real river, Acheron was presented mythologically as a river that encircled hell, so Hecate saying to meet her at "the pit of Acheron" can be interpreted as meeting her in hell (3.5.15). She also implies that it is there that Macbeth will learn of his own destiny, essentially saying that he will die before he knows he even can die. She later references "the corner of the moon", which implicates Roman mythology's strange relationship with Greek mythology (3.5.23). Many Greek gods have a Roman counterpart, some well-known examples being Zeus and Jupiter, Hera and Juno, and Poseidon and Neptune. Hecate is no different, with a Roman counterpart by the name of Trivia. However, Trivia is occasionally depicted as being the same as Diana, the Roman counterpart of Artemis, the Greek moon goddess of the hunt.

In Greek mythology, Hecate is also the goddess of crossroads. There were often poles put up in her honor at many crossroads, with the faces of three women strung to them. In certain myths, Hecate is also symbolized in the same manner as the neopagan Triple Goddess. In this, she has three forms: the maiden, the mother, and the crone. This is in theme with Hecate being Diana the moon goddess, as the different forms of the Triple Goddess are in relation to the phases of the moon. The Three Witches in *Macbeth* seem to be an interpretation of Hecate having three faces as they all seem to think on the same level and finish each other's sentences. They revere Hecate for her being the "mistress of [their] charms" for she is evidently the one who has given them their power as witches (3.5.6). Perhaps the relationship between the Three Witches and Hecate is not unlike that of the body of a tree, with Hecate being the trunk from which the limbs of the Three Witches grow. Or perhaps, it is exactly like those poles at ancient Greek crossroads where Hecate is the pole and the faces are the Three Witches. Perhaps Macbeth was walking down the path of life when he encountered a crossroads in which the Three Witches pointed him down the path of murder and destruction. Hecate described herself as "The close contriver of all harms" (3.5.7). She is a goddess, an immortal being who seeks to exploit the weakness of humans, which she and the Three Witches know to be the

forever false illusion of security. She is the pure embodiment of evil and wickedness and spreads her atrocious doings to the people about her.

The hubris of Macbeth is an interesting topic as it was foretold by the goddess of witchcraft before his demise. While speaking to the other witches, she said that “[Macbeth] shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear his hopes ’bove wisdom, grace and fear” (3.5.30-31). In doing so, she told them exactly what would happen to Macbeth; Macbeth would be so sure of his reign that he would laugh at death despite all warnings his fear or wisdom might give him. And so it was, as Macbeth dueled Macduff, he found himself bewildered that the unseemly downfall told to him by the witches would soon come to pass. Even then, Macbeth denied the truth before him because his hubris had built up so much arrogance that he could not believe it. Indeed, it was not until Macbeth had died and was in the pit of Acheron that he had discovered his fate.

The tale of *Macbeth* is a dark and bloody one, full of deceit, rage, and murder. The sins of Macbeth himself were undoubtedly some of the most treacherous deeds in the play. The actions and doings of the witches and Hecate were unmitigated evil. Throughout the entirety of the show is the theme of Greek lore and mythology that shapes the characters in incredible underlying ways. From the obvious incorporation of Hecate’s witchcraft to the quiet relationship between Lady Macbeth and Pandora, the inclusion of Greek themes is undeniable.

Molly Thompson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Katie Kilcullen

Category: Critical Essay

Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood tells of Offred's experience in the fictional world of Gilead, a horrible becoming of the world. Within this novel of oppression and rebellion, the reader sees a recurring phrase throughout the chapters. It is simple and fake, yet it carries a heavy meaning. This phrase is used as a motif to inform a theme about fighting against oppression through hidden rebellion, words, and the defiance of rules.

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. A faux Latin expression. *Do not let the bastards grind you down* Offred first discovered it in her room upon her cupboard when she "knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell" (Atwood 52). Although its meaning was unknown to her at the time, it was a monumental discovery. It could have been a single haphazard line scratched into the wood and Offred would still have treasured it dearly, for it was not understanding what the writing translated to so much as what it *meant* that its worth came from. The etching *meant* that there was a possibility of rebellion that could leave a literal lasting impression. Offred had rebelled before in slight ways: swaying her hips when she should be stiff, stealing butter to moisturize her skin, staring when she ought to look away, and other forms of quiet defiance. Finding out this kept away secret was a symbol of a hope that her 'small' rebellions could be abiding and beautifully damaging, and that other people would rebel as well.

This phrase, in its incorrect Latin, is something that she says in her darkest times, and even discovered it in the darkest corner of a cupboard, waiting to be seen. She is in a hidden state of torment, doing her best to isolate herself from her feelings, which slowly eat her up. She yearns for the past, sorrows over the present, and fears what is yet to come. Stuck in the theocracy of Gilead, Offred finds herself coping with doubtful prayer, including the very phrase she found hidden in her room. "Oh God, I pray. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" she says, while pondering how the world had come to this (92). She says to not let the bastards grind you down to remind herself not to submit entirely to the oppression she is experiencing alongside all other women. It is also a prayer to God, she cannot fathom that he would willingly allow this to happen. Begging, in her mind, is useless. Instead she tries to remind Him, to not be put down by the evil nature of men. That He can strike down the evil as he did in the Exodus with hallowing Plagues. However, as Atwood is agnostic, we can infer that her character Offred is, too. In which case, her prayer is a mockery and ends right after she says "oh God, I pray," and the 'Latin' is directed exclusively to herself. Or perhaps, the concept of God has been beaten into her and she does not know what to do except pray.

The twisting of *nolite te bastardes carborundorum* in Offred's mind is a saddening thing. The initial discovery of the phrase was written with the same tone of a miracle occurring with it. The simple thrill of finding something so secret and hidden made her satisfied at knowing that it existed. It was so beautifully illegal, for it "was a message and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by [Offred], for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next" (52). She used it as a prayer—to herself and to God—when she had no other words to give. From here it grows darker, and as she delves deeper into depression it becomes a mocking phrase of an unattainable existence. She asks the Commander what it means and he *laughs* at it, saying that it is no more than a farce of school boys thinking themselves wiser than their masters. At the end, she "[repeats it to herself] but it conveys nothing" as she has not been ground down by the bastards, but watched as those around her have (291). But for all of Offred's hopelessness, it is on the next page that she escapes Gilead, a semblance that she had held out and not been ground down into the dirt like so many others.

She will forget her pain, but never those scratches upon the wood.

Molly Thompson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Katie Kilcullen

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Shared Tears

I did not always know what empathy is, neither by definition nor experience. Sure, I would laugh when my friends would laugh, but I would do so because *I* wanted to, not because I saw *them* laughing. I would cry when *I* was sad, fume when *I* had something to be angry about. I never cared about the expense of others because as a young child, I never needed to.

Growing up, my family and I lived in a decently sized house with two stories and a basement. My twin sister Sarah and I shared a room upstairs that held a twin bed and a bunk. We did not use the bunk bed for a period of time as we used to be too small for it to be safe, and hence the ladder was not kept in our bedroom.

I have a few strong memories of the house, one of which was a time only shortly after Sarah and I had moved out of the nursery and into that bedroom. Sarah would curl upon the twin bed while I still slept in my crib, but with the bars removed.

Something that should perhaps be taken note of is that Sarah and I had, and still have, a tendency to be menaces when we put our minds too close together. Shenanigans were a common experience in our old bedroom. Dad always called us monkeys.

One morning when we were four, Sarah and I woke up before our parents, so we simply *had* to cause some mischief. We climbed to the top bunk, using the built-in shelves on the side as hand and foot holds. Up with us came a horde of stuffed animals and a child-sized toy broomstick. The mattress was just out of arm's reach from the whirling ceiling fan.

We had executed our plot perfectly up to this point where we would enact the finale, which consisted of us throwing stuffed animals at the spinning blades and whacking them with the broom. A few minutes later, our parents came in.

“What are you doing?!” Mom gasped with a mixture of bewilderment and slight anger in her voice as she burst through the doorway.

We just rolled around and giggled until they took us off the bed, thus ending our endeavor.

There is another strong memory I have of my childhood home. We lived on a hill, so while our yard was flat, there was a slope at either end. There was no fence, and we could walk freely from the back to the front.

The lack of a fence posed a problem, however, when we wanted our dog—a white Maltese named Togo by my older sister Elaine—to be able to run around the back without being on a leash. The solution was simple. We placed a triangular metal stake in the center of the yard, and attached a long rope so he could walk around the backyard with minimal inhibition.

Near the back left of our backyard, almost right on the property line, there was a small patch of bamboo. Now the thing you need to know about bamboo is that it grows *fast*. So fast that there is rumored to be an old Asian torture method where the victim would be tied to a cot above a patch of young bamboo and a day later they would be impaled. Long story short, dad had to trim it every so often to keep it from falling over on its own weight.

On one particular occasion, he was trimming the bamboo while mom was out of the house. My sisters and I helped him by carrying the bamboo to the side of the house where we would shove it in trash bags. With our arms full of beams as long as we were tall, we crossed the middle of the yard to the bags. We laughed as we argued who could hold the most, and ran back and forth in a race.

A common misconception about bamboo is that it is a type of wood. It is not. It is a species of grass with a hollow stem. This can be rather deceiving, because bamboo is very, very hard. So hard that it might even be a hazard when two five-year-olds and their eight-year-old sister are running around carrying multiple culms of it.

As we ran about the backyard, we forgot about Togo's small metal spike that was buried in the grass. Sarah was sprinting across the grass, holding a particularly long shaft of bamboo when her foot slammed into it and she fell over. The bamboo twisted in her arms and the sharp end of it came up and hit her in the face on her way down.

She screamed.

Dad whipped around and scrambled up from where he was chopping to run over to her, while a string of anxious words came out of his mouth.

I stood there with my mouth agape, dumbstruck and without a clue as to what was happening. A moment ago, we had been running around giggling and now she was collapsed with her hands covering her left eye. My small mind could barely comprehend it.

Dad picked her up as she wailed and carried her into the kitchen, where Elaine and I followed. Dad had managed to pry Sarah's hands off of her face, but her eyes stayed shut. As I peeked at her from behind dad, I noticed that beneath her eye was a small but considerable pool of blood. It seemed as though her skin had cracked upwards from the initial blow and now the whole break was oozing blood.

Prior to that afternoon, my only experience of blood had been occasional bloody noses that would go away with a minute of pinching, and were of ultimately no consequence. I struggled to understand why everyone was so stressed beyond the obvious pain Sarah was in. It slowly occurred to me that Sarah might have lost her eye, and for some reason unknown to me I began to feel stressed as well as I started to fidget with my hands.

I was vaguely aware of dad on the phone with someone, my grandparents, I think.

"...soon as possible, Mary isn't home and I can't take all three of them to the emergency room..."

I looked at Elaine as she wiped her face and frowned—she was crying. Had she gotten hurt too? I couldn't seem to recall her falling.

"Elaine?" I said, reaching up and touching her shoulder.

She turned her gaze away from Sarah's form to stare expectantly at me.

"Did you get hurt?" I asked her.

She shook her head, wiping some tears away.

I furrowed my brow in confusion, as I couldn't come up with any other reason for someone to cry.

"Well, why are you crying, then?"

Now it was Elaine's turn to be confused as she looked at me quizzically. "Because..." she began hesitantly, searching my face for signs of mockery, "Sarah got hurt,"

She said it as though it were so obvious, yet upon hearing the revelation my face just contorted even more.

"But..." I started, contemplating how to phrase what was on my mind, "why would that make *you* cry?"

"I guess I'm just... hurting *for* her," and with that she turned her attention back to Sarah's bleeding face and dad. It was difficult to discern from her teary-eyed expression whether she was angry or puzzled.

After what felt like ages, Sarah and Dad had left for the hospital and my grandparents were at home with me and Elaine.

I, however, was still with Elaine having that conversation over and over again.

"*I was hurting for her...*"

How could that be? How was it possible for someone to feel pain on such a level that it would make them cry, and yet none of the pain was their own? I had always considered crying something to be hidden, to be tucked into corners where no one could see such an embarrassment.

Yet here was my sister, face red and blotchy with no shame in sight. Openly crying for pain that, although I couldn't *see* it, I knew she had felt. And despite myself, I started to tear up.

From then on, my life was changed. I began to laugh because I saw my friends laugh, finding myself enjoying their mirth. I cry when others are sad, I let people rant to me when they are upset. I care about the expense of others because, now? I do need to.

Molly Thompson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Katie Kilcullen

Category: Flash Fiction

Exchange

Can you hear me?

Yes.

Can we talk?

'Course we can.

Are you mad at me? You've been quieter than usual

No, I'm not mad at you, just frustrated in general.

What's going on?

Everything that's been happening lately is getting to me, the stress is becoming a bit much.

Is there anything I can do? I have study guides I can lend you if you need help studying.

I'm not talking about studying.

Oh,

What, then?

Just some personal stuff.

Want to talk about it?

Not particularly.

Is there anything I can do to help?

Not really.

Oh ok.

Sorry, it's just, I feel kind of helpless, you know? Like, there's so much going on in our lives right now and I just can't *do* anything about it and I swear sometimes I can't breathe because of it.

You still there?

Yeah, I'm here.

Ok great.

Hey, I'm really sorry if I'm like, stepping over a boundary or something, but I've just been so *soorried* about you because you've barely spoken a word recently and I don't know how to help.

Like, obviously I can't *help* help but you seem like you're in so much pain so I feel like a bad friend when I just watch uselessly

Can you hear me?

Hey, you there?

Aliya Vandonge

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Perfectly Imperfect

Perfectly imperfect

“Perfect.” A word that is used every day but doesn't truly mean what it's supposed to. *Your hair looks perfect! Oh my gosh, your outfit is perfect. That girl is just perfect.* But no, no one is perfect, and if we are truly honest with ourselves, nothing can be perfect either outside of Jesus. The expectations society has for everyone are sky-high. Especially for teenage girls. You must have an hourglass body with a perfect smile, white teeth, and smooth silky hair for people to even notice you; however, if you do have a good body then guys will sexualize you, and suddenly you feel desolate.

People always assume that everyone is fine, and nothing is wrong, but for most people, it's the opposite. Some people will have a smile on their face, as bright as the sun out in public, but whenever they get home, they have this blanket of grief that overcomes them, and they have a massive hole in their hearts that won't go away. It's almost like you are a bear that just got shot by a poacher but has to act okay and run. Some people can't escape the pain that has overcome them and think about suicide as a way to escape their pain. Every word spoken is impactful and people often fail to realize this fact.

The sentence that hurt me the most happened to be only six words long. It was a phone call from my mom stating, “Aliya, your sister is threatening suicide.” Those words may have changed me forever because they opened up my eyes to a whole new world. It's not the same perfect world that I had thought it was growing up. Growing up, my only concern was what color of popsicle I would eat. I quickly grew up with those words and the new reality I faced. My heart felt as if it was in another dimension, and it dropped like someone skydiving from the infinite sky. A thousand thoughts raced through my head of what could have happened. *Is she going to die? What happened? What if I never get to see her again? Why did this have to happen to me?* With a thousand thoughts running through my head, I set in my new reality awaiting my family's phone call from the hospital.

I sat alone with my mind racing, my heart soaring, and wet tears rolling down my face until my phone buzzed. It was not my parents, but instead my best friend. Not knowing what was going on, she had a nudge to call me that afternoon. Her call was a blessing from God and felt like a bear hug, warm and comforting, almost like the feeling you get when you jump into freshly washed hot, and cozy sheets. She got me through that moment, listening as I sobbed and was simply just there as I awaited my family. My best friend had never seen this side of me as I, too, like so many others, put on a front to everyone. I am viewed as the girl that has it all together, but surprise! I don't.

My family arrived home late that night with my sister. We learned that she had been a victim of repetitive bullying at school. My sister felt that there was no escape from the words of her attacker. Little did this bully know that my sister had an army behind her. It has taken months and an army of support around my sister, but through positive affirmation and an application of coping skills, my sister is doing a lot better and learning to confront her bullies and fears with her head up in confidence. The crazy thing is, my sister has always had the best laugh and brightest smile out there. She always places others' needs above her own and no one would guess that she was crumbling inside due to the selfish attempt of a bully to bring themselves up by belittling my sister.

Words are so powerful, and there are numerous stories to prove this. We do not always know what someone may be struggling with; therefore, we must always strive to show kindness and love. As Matshona Dhliwayo would say, “You become strong by lifting others up, not pulling them down.”

Nobody is perfect, but try to live your best life with what you have been given. It's important to treat others the way you want to be treated, and love others the way you want to be loved. Self-respect is important, but loving life is even more important. Look at the world around us! There are so many things to be grateful for: a friend who calls due to a hunch, the sound of laughter, family and friends who are part of your army, sunsets, and many other beautiful things that we fail to intentionally notice daily. You only get a certain amount of time here on earth, so try and make the most of it while you can along with making other people's lives extraordinary as well!

Raye Wangler

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Short Story

Lamb To The Slaughter

I took my work hat off as I walked down the sidewalk to the porch steps, using my other hand to fluff my hair back up again. I took a deep breath in and let it back out slowly. *It was a bit of a rough shift, but I'm really starting to like this job.* As I made my way up the last step I heard a muffled voice yelling from inside the house. *Bryan.* I felt my heart, and my smile, drop. I hesitated, standing still on the porch for a moment. His words were muffled and I couldn't make out what he was saying, but he was clearly pissed. *Don't go inside.*

I sighed and walked over to the porch railing, letting my body slump over it as I listened to the incoherent yelling. *That's one way to ruin my night.* I let out a small, breathy laugh and let my eyes slowly scan the cul-de-sac I grew up in. I was used to them yelling at each other by now. *Things didn't use to be this way.* I let my mind wander, thinking back to when Wyatt and I would fly kites in the street, back when the only things we'd worry about were passing cars and the sun setting. *Now those were the good ol' days.* Slowly a smile crept back onto my face, but it was short lived happiness.

A loud crash came from inside the house, vibrations from the impact shaking the porch beneath me. I jumped up, my blood running cold as I whipped around to face the door. At first I couldn't move, my whole body was frozen. That was until I heard my mom screaming.

Everything happened so fast, I lunged at the door, hastily turning the knob and pushing my way into the house. The door slammed against the inside of the house, catching Bryan's attention. He was standing in the middle of the living room, but I was more focused on my mother, who was using the wall she had been slammed into to balance as she stood. "Zane! What are you doing home so early?" She avoided my eyes but I could tell there was blood trickling down her forehead. "You shouldn't be home for another hour or two," Bryan said all too calmly.

"Get the fuck away from my mom," I was surprised by my own voice, the tone it held, and yet it felt like my heart could beat right out of my chest. Bryan slowly turned, his eyes narrowing as he looked at my figure in the doorway. "The hell did you just say to me?" *I can smell the alcohol on his breath.* I felt my body stiffen, and at that moment I could feel five years of pent up anger towards Bryan pulse through my veins. I narrowed my eyes back at him as I yelled "I said get away from my mom, hear me now asshole?" Bryan took a step forward. "Bryan, don't." Mom put her hand on his shoulder, trying to stop him only to be shoved harshly to the side as he continued towards me. I clenched my fist, and when he pushed her aside I lost it.

I didn't wait for him to get to me, instead, I closed the distance between us myself, throwing a quick left hook. My fist collided with his jaw, the impact making him stumble back slightly. Before I could even fully process what I had just done he was coming at me, hitting me square in the face with much more force than I expected. I wobbled backward in a daze, hot liquid starting to drip from my nose as Bryan yanked me back toward him. His arm snaked around my neck, locking me tightly in place as the blood dripped down my lip. *Fuck fuck fuck.* I tried twisting my body out of the chokehold in vain, the pressure on my neck increasing each time I moved. I gasped as I struggled to draw a breath in, panic setting in when I realised Bryan showed no signs of loosening his hold. *He's gonna kill me.* The edges of my vision began to grow darker and I grabbed at Bryan's arm, desperately digging my nails into his skin as a final attempt to fight back.

"Stop! Let him go!" Mom grabbed Bryan's arm, desperately trying to pull him away. Bryan grunted as he let go of me, allowing me to fall weakly to my knees. I coughed a few times, blood spattering onto the porch below me. My chest heaved as I tried to draw air back into my lungs, every breath a dull knife repeatedly stabbing into my torso. After a few moments, I looked up at Bryan. He stood completely still, looking down at my beaten body with cold eyes. "You'll learn to respect me one way or another,"

I looked over at mom who stood several feet away, tears falling down her cheeks. Bryan glanced over at her then spun around, walking back into the house. Mom looked at me again, then without a word, she followed him

back inside. *Like a lamb to the slaughter.* I shuddered at the morbid thought, quickly pushing it away. I sat there for a moment in what must have been shock, trying to process what just happened. A dull ache consumed my body, the pain in my face becoming more and more noticeable as my adrenaline wore off. *Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.* I took a deep, shaky breath in and lifted my torso, wincing as I attempted to stand again.

My legs buckled beneath me, pulling me back down. I yelled in frustration, punching the wooden planks below me before slumping back onto my knees. Tears spilled from my eyes and I didn't try to stop them this time. *Look at you, so weak and helpless, kneeling in front of your own home.* I looked down at the small pool of blood beneath me before holding my hands out in front of my face. *Did I do the right thing?* My knuckles had already started to redden, and I could tell by the feeling in my face I'd definitely wake up with a few bruises, that is if I'm able to sleep tonight. *Did I really think I could win?* I sniffed, pulling my legs closer to my body and locking my arms around myself. *What if he beats her more now?* Thoughts raced through my mind quicker than I could process and I buried my head into my knees, trying in vain to silence them. *How long has he been doing this? Does he hurt Wyatt?* My body tensed at the thought of him putting his hands on my brother. *This has to be new right? Surely I would've already noticed signs of him hitting mom by now if it wasn't.*

I lifted my head and looked up at the night sky, still trying to steady my breathing. The moon dimly lit up the street around me, a few stars resting beside it. *What now?* I looked over at the front door a few feet away from me, fear bubbling in my stomach. *I don't wanna go back inside.* I turned my head and looked back out towards the street. It felt strangely quiet now. A soft breeze danced through the trees, rustling the leaves slightly and filling the silence. *But where would I go? This is my home.* My breathing finally started becoming normal again. *Should I tell someone? Who would I tell? What if that makes things worse?* I looked back up at the sky again, feeling lost *I need answers.* There was one question in my mind that seemed to drown out the others, eventually finding its way to my lips. "Why?" I whispered the word quietly to the sky, knowing I wouldn't get an answer. The stars twinkled just as they did before.

Rebecca Xue

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jeffrey Baxter

Category: Critical Essay

To kill or not to kill

To Kill or Not To Kill

We say, “revenge is a dish best served cold”, but just how cold are we willing to be? As one of the 58 countries that utilize the death penalty and the only 2 industrialized countries that implement it, the United States permits the usage of “painless” methods to execute inmates at the state and federal levels. More than 1,500 men and women have been executed in the United States since the 1970s, and another two thousand are sitting on death row, waiting for their fate. The continued use of the sentence is aimed at providing retribution for victims’ families and reducing crime rates in vulnerable areas. Although the long-running policy of capital punishment may serve to deter possible criminals from carrying out their crimes and provide a sense of protection for Americans, abolishing the death penalty completely in the United States at both the state and federal levels would serve to eliminate the severe injustice that marginalized death row inmates face and preserve the constitutionality of our country’s criminal justice system.

First created in ancient times, capital punishment was designed to reflect the “eye for an eye” principle. Defenders of the death penalty also consider the closure and comfort the sentence brings families of the defendants’ victims. However, the occurrence of many different genocides and crimes against humanity has brought the government’s right to kill into question. Taking into account the most heinous crimes possible, the International Covenant and Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) was passed by the United Nations and ratified by more than 170 countries, including the United States. The pact asks countries to abolish the death penalty except for cases dealing with “the most serious crimes.” (Gale) The ICCPR acknowledges the moral pitfalls of the punishment while permitting it for certain offenses like war crime. Currently, the United States allows state governments to make their own legislation regarding the topic. In fact, twenty-three US states have abolished the death penalty on their own. Interestingly, more criminals have also been executed at the state level than at the federal level. The punishment still remains legal in our nation for a variety of reasons. For example, 61% of Californians were hesitant to abolish the death penalty entirely in one 2019 voter survey (Willon). The support is likely due to the death penalty’s 0% recidivism rate, protecting the general public from serial killers and rapists such as the Golden State Killer. Yet, there is still a fiery, ongoing debate about the death penalty happening in the Supreme Court. Justices have been divided by ideological lines on the topic and have failed to make any change regarding the policy. The validity of capital punishment has been upheld by a majority for several decades, and this opinion has shone through in a slew of court cases arguing against it. However, dissenting justices continue to be concerned about the unreliability of the entire process and the pain it inflicts on the criminals, both physically and mentally (Wolf). In 2002, Supreme Court justices agreed on one idea: that to inflict the death penalty on the mentally impaired was a violation of the Eighth Amendment, which protects against cruel and unusual punishment. Nonetheless, discrepancies in this landmark decision have complicated the execution of the policy throughout the nation, threatening many inmates whose lives are on the line.

One such group of people are historically marginalized inmates, especially the mentally impaired. The implementation of the death penalty in the United States only compounds this inequity. The 2002 *Atkins v Virginia* case was a landmark decision in which Supreme Court justices protected the rights of the intellectually disabled, but this also provided room for interpretation as to what “intellectually disabled” really meant. One popular method of measuring intelligence was by using IQ tests. Different versions of these assessments, such as the WAIS-R test, which tests adults, along with their different interpretations, heavily contribute to the dangerously arbitrary nature of the justice system. The same defendant can get different scores on different tests due to differing scales and

parameters, making IQ testing an unreliable criterion with which to judge criminals. Corey Johnson, an intellectually disabled adult who was put on trial for murder in the 1990s, is one example of this. Johnson's IQ examination determined that he was not in the range of IQ to be exempt from the death penalty, and subsequently, was put on death row after his conviction (Bruenig). It is abominable to think that this decision, one that should be made critically and with gravity, was made with one single number. Furthermore, it has been revealed that the psychologist that had carried out Johnson's IQ test at the time had forgotten to adjust for something known as the "Flynn effect", which states that IQ scores have been rising slowly over time (Trahan). In fact, by re-scaling Johnson's test results to reflect the appropriate era, psychologist Dr. Gregory Olley concluded that Johnson's IQ would have fallen in the range exempting him from the death penalty. This small mistake, which ended up costing Johnson his life in early 2021, is only one of several that the intellectually disabled face as they try to defend themselves against a system that continues to classify them into non-existent categories.

This legal system, fraught with discrepancies, continues to threaten the fairness of the "fair trials" guaranteed to all Americans. Small variations in state laws treat the intellectually disabled with different criteria and conditions that may unintentionally give some criminals a harder time in court. In Georgia, defendants are tasked with proving they are intellectually disabled "beyond a reasonable doubt". This miniscule phrase, which is unique to the laws of only a few states in the US, puts significant pressure on the defendant to find evidence that could convince a judge of something that many scientists agree is intangible. Worse yet, many criminal cases are evaluated by juries, not qualified psychologists, who are in charge of deciding between life and death for the defendant. Leaving it up to the juries exposes the defendants to judgment that is stereotypical and lacking nuance, rather than expert evaluation that can encompass a variety of mental disorders. Georgia's law directly opposes the purpose of the Atkins decision and risks the execution of prisoners who are unable to prove their circumstances. In an interview with a legislator who drafted this law, Jack Martin, he expressed his regret and carelessness when writing it, and admitted that it had actually been a linguistic mistake (Liptak). While it may seem like a small mistake on his part, inconsistencies in the law such as this one have had tremendous consequences on intellectually disabled defendants. One such example is Lisa Montgomery, a woman who had murdered Bobbie Jo Stinnett in 2004. She was convicted and sentenced to death in 2007 by a jury who was dubious that Montgomery's impairment affected her judgment. Her lawyers argued that she had been sexually abused as a young girl and was affected by years of preceding mental disorders. They appealed to the Court of Appeals, demanding a further examination of Montgomery's mental history, which had the potential to change her severe sentence. (Marimow, Barnes). However, the court eventually denied this request. Disagreements in the law allowed for her execution, along with other defendants who had previously and unsuccessfully tried to argue for their exemption. This needless confusion, which results from disorganization between our state and federal legal systems, can be wholly avoided by a federal mandate abolishing the death penalty.

Appeals like the ones Montgomery's legal team made are very common with death sentences due to the severity of the punishment. However, these appeals present not only a hurdle to criminals, but also to communities and victims themselves. Criminals sentenced to the death penalty get an automatic appeal in all states where the punishment is still in use. (Bonta) Inmates can appeal a number of things, including unequal protection under the law (due to race) or other mistakes made during their trials. Because the incorrect outcome of the sentence risks the very lives of the criminals, they are entitled to appeal trials with highly qualified lawyers that are often required to be "death-penalty" certified. In addition, criminals must also be provided with public defenders, which are paid for by taxpayers in the state. (Death Penalty Information Center). In fact, because of all the costs that come with these lengthy trial processes, carrying out the death penalty is 10 times more expensive than carrying out a comparable sentence like life without parole. (HG) Along with the fact that the number of criminals on death row is significantly higher than the number of criminals actually executed, this perpetuates the burden taxpayers must carry to constantly pay for the legal and trial costs that ensue. However, these trials have the biggest impact on the victims themselves. Because they are subjected to these lengthy trials, families often have to relive certain moments of traumatic crimes and continue to grieve the loss of their loved ones for years and years. In addition, the actual execution of criminals does not provide a definitive end to the pain of these families but rather leaves them asking more questions about the crimes. A study compared survivors in Texas, where the death penalty is used, and Minnesota, where life without parole is used. It was one of the first of its kind that truly interacted with the families in-depth, and it found that victims in Minnesota were healthier physically and psychologically, and also felt more confident in the justice system. (Armour, Umbreit) And though the belief that the death penalty provides solace for these families is ingrained in the minds of Americans, the results of the study show that we must challenge our existing preconceptions of the sentence and reconsider what truly is best for these families.

The closure the sentence supposedly provides for families is not the only reason why people still defend the

death penalty. Supporters of the death penalty argue that the punishment deters people from committing future crimes and provides necessary retribution for severe crimes. Proponents believe staunchly in the “eye for an eye” concept, and capital punishment simply yields equal revenge against those who commit murder. Citizens who lean to the right are more likely to agree with this statement, as nearly 80% of them say that the death penalty is morally justified. Out of these Republican-leaning voters, 50% also believe that the death penalty acts as a deterrent for criminals (Pew). Americans seeking safety and protection from dangerous criminals are rational in their desires, and it is natural to believe that incapacitation would be the most effective way of achieving this. However, studies done in communities that enforce the death penalty have shown that the policy does not have a significant impact on lowering crime rates in those areas, and many researchers agree that there is no provable deterrent effect that capital punishment provides (Cohen-Cole). The long history of injustice that inmates face while on death row and the risk of killing an innocent person outweighs any of these possible benefits.

The discrimination and hardship that the intellectually disabled face in the court system as well as the mental and physical torture death row inmates endure are reasons enough to get rid of the punishment entirely. By abolishing the death penalty at the federal level, state governments would have no way to circumvent the decisions, and defendants would not face the discrepancies of state legislations that they experience currently. A consistent policy that encompasses the entire country would allow us to take one step further into making sure all trials are fair. Much of the remaining support for capital punishment stems from the safety it provides citizens everywhere. However, there are much more humane ways to solve this issue. For example, implementing “life without parole” instead of the death penalty as the maximum sentence for certain crimes would incapacitate that criminal without killing them. Keeping them in prison with a life sentence with no opportunity to argue their way out without inflicting the mental pain of impending death is a much more effective method of keeping dangerous people off of our streets. In addition, the “life without parole” sentence would reduce the risk of our government executing innocent people. Many innocent prisoners are exonerated after spending nearly an entire decade on death row, and the peril of killing people before that opportunity due to faulty investigations or trials can be successfully avoided by establishing “life without parole”. Although capital punishment was created simply to be fair and equal, it is clear that the policy has morphed its way into a destructive evil that has threatened the constitutionality of our own legal systems. Abolition of the death penalty in the United States is the only way Americans will be able to restore their dignity and pride in being the “city upon a hill.”

Max Yang

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Bird's Eye View

A black mass flitting through the underbrush. A flame-orange streak. Could it be? Breathing in the crisp, October air, I crouched for a better view. It was beautiful—a Blackburnian warbler—and species #100 on my birding life-list. “Yes!” I mouthed, careful to not disturb the bird.

Soon after joining the Science Olympiad ornithology event in ninth grade, I fell in love with birding. Although I’d initially thought that learning the diets, calls, and habitats of 200 bird species in a month might be overwhelming, I was quickly hooked. When the pandemic forced everyone into isolation, my backyard birds became my window to the world. From my dining room, I observed chickadees energetically bouncing about, nuthatches skillfully scaling trees, and downy woodpeckers drumming intently in the woods. Fascinated by their beauty and diversity, I made a goal to see 100 bird species before high school ended.

Determined, I started seeking out specific birds. When travel restrictions eased, I planned a road trip to the Indiana Dunes. After hours of hiking and blood-thirsty mosquito attacks, I witnessed the awe-inspiring sight of thousands of slender-legged sandhill cranes (#37). A year later, in the Louisiana bayous, my imagination was captivated by the crystal-clear “rain call” of the yigüirro (#60) cutting through the moisture-laden air—my reward for chasing it down for an hour.

I soon realized that, given so many similar-looking species, spotting the bird was often only half the challenge. The difference between two birds might be as minor as a white vs. yellow forehead patch, or a “chit-chit weooo” compared to a “chit-chit whEEP.” Thus, I must hone my senses and analyze every minute detail—feathers, calls, flight patterns, and more—all in a few seconds. Even then, I sometimes can’t reach a definitive answer. But birding has taught me that, as long as I’ve been diligent, I can come up with a fairly good guess.

The species on my life-list steadily increased. By my junior year, the end was in sight. But then, one weekend at Illinois’ Carlyle Lake, I was shocked to spot a magnificent frigatebird. It was a Caribbean seabird—an incredibly rare sighting in the Midwest. As I checked off bird #86, I couldn’t help but wonder: what was it doing here?

After poring over birding forums late at night, I hypothesized that the recent Hurricane Ida had blown it, along with other tropical birds, thousands of miles north. Intrigued by the larger forces at play, I immersed myself in further research. To my shock, this wasn’t an isolated incident: frequent storms caused by climate change have destroyed coastal habitats and displaced birds at increasing rates throughout the world.

Awestruck by the frigatebird’s ability to survive its ordeal, I recognized the vulnerability and resilience of life. For the first time, I understood that birding isn’t just adding checkmarks to my life-list. Seeing the innumerable connections within nature’s intricate web, I recognized a mission beyond my passion: to advocate for birds.

I started sharing the birds’ stories—reporting observations of rare birds to the global monitoring network, teaching middle schoolers about ornithology and sustainability, and bringing my cross-country teammates to see Mississippi Flyway birds for a conservation “Big Day.” Discussing the rising sea impact at the International Geography Olympiad, I spoke for the saltmarsh sparrow, calling for action to protect it and countless other species teetering on the brink of extinction.

Unfortunately, birds are not alone in their struggle to survive. All living beings are facing daunting challenges: extreme

weather, resource depletion, epidemics, and more. But rather than being intimidated by these challenges, I'm determined to persevere—just like birds do in their globe-crossing journeys—in finding ways to address these problems so our planet's life can thrive.

Although I'm thrilled to have sighted 100 different bird species—and I'll always remember the day I saw that Blackburnian warbler—I'm even more grateful for the perspective that birds have given me.

To my 100+ feathered friends: thank you for the inspiration.

Max Yang

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Humor

A Toast to the LZS8WS Elkay EZH2O Water Fountain

(Clinking *water* bottle) Thank you all for joining me today! I'd like to make a toast to a very important someone...

We first met on my first day of school. It had been a long day, and there was just one class left. But the walk from the third floor to the language hall was long. Unfamiliar. Daunting. And there I was, just a meek little freshman. I was a fish out of water. Scared. Lost. And most importantly, *dehydrated*. But suddenly, in this desert lined with linoleum tile and with walls plastered with not all that motivational quotes, an oasis appeared. The EZH2O water fountain. Pulling on all my remaining strength, I trudged over and took a sip of the elixir it dispensed. Instantly, I was refreshed by the crisp, clean taste of the water. And through my years, my appreciation with the EZH2O has continued to grow, a feeling I'm sure shared by hundreds of other thirsty students.

To further illustrate its universal significance, I would like to reflect on the "devious lick" phase last year. Out of all the things stolen from schools across the country—soap dispensers, fire extinguishers, and entire bathroom stalls—never once did I hear about one of those water fountains being stolen. And although some may claim this may be due to its sheer size, I would like to posit instead that this suggests two things: one, students couldn't care less if their school burns down, and two, having access to the clean, fresh water provided by the Elkay EZH2O is a basic need that all students value.

And the EZH2O is just so reliable (unlike our weird paper towel dispensers). All I need to do is bring my water bottle up to the sensor, and voila, *water*. Sure, sometimes the filter does need to be changed, but even then, the machine conveniently has three lights to indicate when that needs to happen. And in a larger sense, the lights serve to remind us that each of us sometimes just needs to take a break and let others know you need help.

There's a quote by Mark Twain on a wall in the student entrance downstairs that reads "out of the public school grows the greatness of the nation." And I believe these humble water fountains represent the same virtues our school was built upon. Just like how we can rely on them to fill our water bottles with fresh, absolutely delicious water, as students, we too rely on our high school to fill our minds with knowledge and a love of learning. Additionally, the water fountain will always be there to help a lost and dehydrated student, just like how our amazing teachers will (most of the time) be there to help a lost student, both literally and metaphorically, find their way. Finally, the little display showing the number of plastic bottles saved reminds us of the impact each water fountain has made on the planet, just like how our high school prepares us to one day set out to create our own impact on the world.

So to the LZS8WS Elkay EZH2O Water Fountain and everything it represents, I extend a most sincere thank you.

Celina Zhou

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Judith Miller, Abigail Eisenberg

Category: Poetry

snippets

i. fidelity

o, Teléia,
have you ever sung for a storm
have you wept at the feet of a king,
raw and bleeding gold and grief
have you dreamt of love and woke to ruin?
the world waits for death, you know
it lingers on its doorstep, halting
and unsure
so love it and love it fiercely:
make a widow of a god.

ii. reticence

some nights I dream, soundlessly
of shattered sky and stars, desperation
mid-flight, seeking a flame –
will you ever be able to see beauty? the wonder you
left behind? the innocence you have forsaken?
dream of me as I dream of you, quiet
with the kindest wrath.

iii. thornapple

when you call me monstrous
I will not deny it, I will devour it.
I, fruit of Eden, dark with rot,
seeping rage and seething hunger:
godhood is dead and I
will not disappear.

iv. duality

a question,
for the father, for the son,
what makes a demon not
an angel? does the line fly
true, straight and unwavering,
unshaken by truth? that is to say,

when night falls, will you go quietly?

Celina Zhou

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Judith Miller, Abigail Eisenberg

Category: Poetry

five rivers

I. – Acheron.

you linger, when you first wash up upon these shores, trapped in some fold between worlds; life and death, a symphony of anguish around you. you watch the ferryman row, his misty figure somewhere between ghost and god. his strokes are steady through the weeping souls, hypnotic in their rhythm.

there is fear in your heart as you stare through the fog at the darkness on the other shore. you wonder what happens when you make that crossing, take that step. you're afraid of the unknown, just like all the rest. realization is acceptance, acceptance is manifestation – how cruel is reality? how kind is fantasy?

(do you know why you linger? it is because your people grieve, so caught up in their own sorrow that they forget your journey has not yet ended. The ferryman waits for the return of your flesh to the earth, gold on your tongue and loam in your throat.

the time comes. it always does. nothing is forever, not even death.)

II. – Phlegethon.

you never thought yourself a sinner before you came here. no one ever does. but there are no angels here; every soul carries the weight of their own guilt upon their shoulders. you are no exception.

when you first enter the river of flame, it is painful in ways that you have never known. the fire burns from the inside out, flushing out all of your rage and all of your hate. the scent of scorched flesh surrounds you, and you remember, now, that this river grieves like all the others.

you're breathless, robbed of air and choking on the smoke of your own funeral pyre. The edges of your vision blur. Something small and shattered within you is screaming.

is this how I die? you think, caught between agony and delirium. there's a voice in your head, rousing – it laughs, cruel and amused.

have you forgotten so soon?

III. – Styx.

danger steeps in the river of hate, and you tremble just standing on its banks. there are no souls that dwell in these waters, only the taint of fear and the remnants of memory. the train of the dead trudges on around you, led by a faint light bobbing on the distant shore. this is not a border you are meant to cross.

legends say that for the living, the river offers the power to challenge the gods. no one speaks of what it takes from the dead. the oathmaker is a thing of balance; a giver and a taker. all things come back to Styx in the end.

you cannot stop yourself from staring at the waves, empty and black like a depthless night. you cannot stop yourself from wondering.

what would you be willing to give? what would you be willing to take?

IV. – Cocytus.

lament drowns you.

the waters are shallow and the current gentle, but there is a terrible weight in your chest that leaves you staggering and aching for breath. weeping surrounds you; the river reeks of salt.

it does not halt against the procession of souls that dam the waters, each just as lost and weary as you. it swirls around your chest, a question and an answer in one. and then it goes on, taking something small but irreplaceable with it.

there is a child in your skull, wailing. *you cannot stay, you cannot stay, you cannot stay* but your limbs are leaden and your head heavy; you've been robbed of something you do not know how to get back. what use is there in going on?

the child weeps and screams, rattling around until your bones ache and echo.

go.

please.

go.

v. – lethe.

when you dreamt of oblivion in life, you feared it. the living always said forgetting was the cruelest part of all; a final step in a journey that could not be undone.

but the milky waters are calm. welcoming. after everything you have seen and everything that has been taken from you, this terrible warmth is kind. you hate yourself for it, but there is nothing left in you with the strength to fear.

the water laps at you, a gentle push and pull, ebb and flow, each stroke washing away ash and soot and memory.

you rest. you dream.

Celina Zhou

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Judith Miller, Abigail Eisenberg

Category: Poetry

mythos

i. gertrude // ophelia

do you weep still, by the river, tears leaving a chasm of silence. I have long accepted misery but this hatred of yours leaves me breathless and	when dawn comes on a gilded horizon remember my love and my tragedy this eldritch sorrow splitting open the sky
in anguish.	
drink a halo of poison staining my lips, as blood of Christ, crimson will you mourn for me, haunted soul will you crown me with rue until it drowns me, my body a temple, ransacked. are shame and pride not one and the same, I will wear both, regardless	beloved, dream of your future and I, among the flowers on the cusp of love, and violet blooms steeped in cruel irony let me be selfish, love and greed forged; hear this plea:
do not forget me.	
I shattered, with the light in your eyes, blazing did you love me, did you love her, with that universe in your eyes expanding to encompass my fickle heart, the gruesome grief of my son, tell me how to be good again; is there for our damned spirits,	I hoped into ash a dream of paradise, where your love sprang endless, to mask that terrible rage my beloved, do you ever ponder this depth of madness which feels so much like
salvation to be found?	

ii. archer moon

love, call yourself greed and be proud of it / take a peach and devour it / let your lips stain with nectar / let your teeth scrape against the pit / the ragged grind echoing through your throat // oh fallen god, remember divinity / a cloud of ivory dreams; a river of jade in your veins // remember the stars / white light on ink, bleeding open the sky // remember you are not a demon / you are a god / remember there is no difference but the shape of the word on your tongue // remember betrayal and lovesickness are one and the same // breathe open song and storm / your throat scraped bitter, raw and rosy // your love is fragile and worn / a gilded thing left brittle and moon white / don't you think it's time to let it break?

iii. prayer for titania

nothing golden remains in me.
plucked and swallowed by hungry gods,
knees bloodied and a throat blazed open
on words of love and prayer –
oh eldritch majesty,
can you count the times
that I have burned?

I am gilded; ruination stripped bare
let me weep at your feet,
my body a tithe.
take me, love me, break me,
hollow me out into devotion and
an ache for a sliver of your light
and pride.
drown me in larkspur,
ribbons of silk and vine,
and plastic thorns to crown me
and carve through blood and anguish
until there is nothing left but bone.
– devour my name, sweet like yew
until it, and I, are yours, too.

iv. mapping knossos

tell me how we go on in the dark
listless, stringless, dancing with an echo
the world a tapestry, unraveled
and tangling at our feet.

sing me a hymn for daylight
tell me stories of snow on the sea;
the angels we traced in the lines of the sky
fledgling dreams on a fading horizon.
lie to me, unremorseful,
white knuckled and adrift in the night:
promise me we'll dream again someday.

Celina Zhou

Age: 15, Grade: 9

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Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Category: Critical Essay

Reflections on Fire

Fire is humanity.

Since the dawn of civilization, it is fire that has kindled and kept burning the heart of humanity. It was fire that gave us warmth, that gave us food and protection, that gave us light.

Fire is our lifeblood. Long have we revered it, long have we feared it. From the guardian of the hearth to the goddess of the sun, fire has long been enshrined in human cultures across land and time.

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is a book of fire, in subject and in heart. The Hearth and the Salamander, Burning Bright -- the beauty and the danger of flame are at the core of its story.

Fittingly, it is a book that has become incendiary in the modern consciousness, banned across states and across countries for various controversies. *Fahrenheit 451* is destructive and breathtaking, and despite its flaws, there is something undeniably, irreversibly important about the stories that it tells.

Begin by considering that *Fahrenheit 451* is meant to be read in an academic setting. Its prose is complex and oftentimes convoluted, but what is important to focus on is its subtext; the themes it carries, the messages it offers. The book follows Guy Montag, a fireman, who burns forbidden books at the bidding of his government and his captain. When he meets an eccentric young girl named Clarisse, he begins to question everything he has been told and taught by his society, eventually breaking free of its confines.

One of the most significant things that *Fahrenheit 451* offers is a condemnation of censorship. When Beatty, the main antagonist of the book, visits Montag in the midst of his internal conflict, he says, "Colored people don't like Little Black Sambo. Burn it. White people don't feel good about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Burn it. Someone's written a book on tobacco and cancer of the lungs? The cigarette people are weeping? Burn the book" (57). Book burning is one of the central themes of *Fahrenheit 451*, as they're seen as something innately divisive and corrupting, as Beatty preaches, "If you don't want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none" (58). Throughout the story, Beatty and another minor character, Prof. Faber, act as ideological foils to each other, trying to pull Montag's mindset in different directions. Both are aware of the dark underbelly of their society, but while Beatty believes wholeheartedly in his cause, Faber, a retired English professor, believes that books are the only things that can save them all. In the end, it is Beatty's perspective that is condemned, as he dies a glorious, fiery death that sparks the beginning of Montag's true rebellion.

Secondly, *Fahrenheit 451* offers nuanced perspectives on ignorance, conformity, and complacency. When Montag kills Beatty and goes on the run, he returns to Faber's home where he finds a temporary solace from the chaos of the outside world. While there, Faber allows himself to be vulnerable with the protagonist, admitting, "Mr. Montag, you are looking at a coward. I saw the way things were going, a long time back. I said nothing. I'm one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the 'guilty,' but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself" (78). Faber was a retired English professor, a true intellectual who believed wholeheartedly in the power and sanctity of literature -- and he stood by as his peers and his friends were condemned, persecuted and even killed, knowing that if he spoke out he, too, would face a similar fate. In his reflection, he shames himself, even

as the reader sympathizes with his plight and understands the humanity behind his actions. This nuance is important -- ignorance is something that everyone possesses, to some degree, but a deep understanding of why we are ignorant and what we can do to rid ourselves of it is what will help us break free from it. In sum, *Fahrenheit 451* declares that ignorance is something that can be forgiven, but not disregarded; justified, but not excused.

Finally, *Fahrenheit 451* offers an impassioned, vivid defense of literature. It is books that countless people died protecting, it is books that drive Montag towards rebellion, it is books that the tyrants fear above all else. When Faber describes his experiences with the firemen and his past, he says, "So now do you see why books are hated and feared? They show the pores in the face of life. The comfortable people want only wax moon faces, poreless, hairless, expressionless" (79). Faber describes books as things that expose the imperfections of society and of humanity, and while someone like Beatty may view that as a negative aspect of literature, Faber and the reader understand that truth will always be more important than happiness fueled by ignorance. Books, *Fahrenheit 451* declares, are the enemies of complacency and the friends of veracity. This message is undeniably important, especially as you consider the eerie similarities between modern society and the alien world portrayed in Bradbury's work.

This essay could not be finished without addressing the inherent flaws of *Fahrenheit 451*. Between its often overly poetic language, flat characters, and convoluted exposition, the veil of its relevancy is peeled back to reveal its age. And that is something that can turn audiences away from the book, losing sight of its invaluable messages in doing so.

But there is a question to pose to the skeptics: what other alternatives are there?

Fahrenheit 451's dystopian portrayal of censorship is not necessarily a unique one -- George Orwell's *1984* comes to mind at the mention of similar stories. But *1984* possesses similar flaws. Its exposition comes in swift, unrelenting flashes of long paragraphs after long paragraphs, and its characters are often unlikable. Its protagonist, Winston Smith, perpetuates and proclaims countless opinions that would be seen today as xenophobic and bigoted. Smith's feelings towards women are described as such: "He disliked nearly all women, and especially the young and pretty ones. It was always the women, and above all the young ones, who were the most bigoted adherents of the Party, the swallows of slogans, the amateur spies and the nosers-out of unorthodoxy."

There are also passages within the book that are blatantly racist, such as when Smith witnesses a procession of prisoners from the opposing state known as Eurasia, "In the trucks little yellow men in shabby greenish uniforms were squatting, jammed close together. Their sad Mongolian faces gazed out over the sides of the trucks, utterly incurious." It is only when the European prisoners are presented that Smith begins to view them as human, "The round Mongol faces had given way to a more European type, dirty, bearded, and exhausted. From over scrubby cheekbones eyes looked into Winston's, sometimes with strange intensity, and flashed away again." These perspectives don't necessarily reflect the opinions of the author, and that Smith is not always meant to be a likable character, but that doesn't take away from the fact that *1984* presents the reader with blatant and unrepentant bigotry. Skeptics may argue that the ideas simply reflect the political atmosphere of Orwell's time, but now is a time to return to *Fahrenheit 451*'s message on ignorance -- forgiven but not disregarded, justified but not excused.

Fahrenheit 451 is in no way a perfect book. Its flaws are numerous, and it will always be challenged. But there are no better alternatives, no other stories that can offer such a spark for discussion on ignorance and individuality. And until another story is written with a brighter spark, *Fahrenheit 451* will continue to be unquestionably significant for learning, no matter how many shelves it is taken off of and how many times it is burned, both literally and metaphorically.

In the end, the world has shown us that banning and attempting to destroy something will not extinguish the flame: it will simply offer it more kindling.

Meifan Zhu

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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Educator: Myra Miller

Category: Poetry

Dante's Inferno script 1

Proceeding the rugged road beyond reach,
I have now climbed to the shore of Fraudsters
Where the cursed sinners sigh in sorrow

My Master bent to reach me with his light
So on such steep climb, I might not tremble
And may view an endless expanse of white

I'm in hell? How pleasing to eyes it is!
Cloud-like and idyllic, that one could dream,
escape the time floating in endless ease

Rows upon rows stretch as far as I see
The white of purity, softness of love
With tender cotton like waves of the sea

"Master, no final sentence has been giv'n"
Said he "look with thy heart, feel with thy eyes"
My heart dropped below cotton rows to see

sinners struggle, made insignificant
like how they made their own beloved feel
Clutching cotton stems to pull themselves up

like those souls shipwrecked in a stormy sea
Tossed, turned, churned, wretched souls sinking, drowning
struggling to reach the surface, find shore...

Suffocated by suffocating love
one hand reached out of the cotton waves, waved
Helplessly, no driftwood of redemption.

"They are the selfish, who demand huge love
From those they say they love with no respect
to their free will, how small they make them feel.

Now, hold no pity, see their suffering
See their deserved fate," My master warned
We watched the wretched souls sink to the depths

O self-centered beasts, forever unloved,
demand what cannot be given, unearned.

Roy Zhu

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jill Donovan

Category: Poetry

Beliefs, a Reminiscent Moment, and Unanswered Questions

Mommy...?

*Mommy,
What happens when you die?
Why can't we move back home?
What happens if I can't make new friends?
Why did you move to America?
Why did someone gun down eight Asian women in Atlanta?
When will Covid end?
Why did that kid stare at me at the grocery store?
Are you proud of me?*

The answers to these unanswered and unasked questions were hiding all along,
like an artifact in the ground, revealed as you walk along life's many adventures, humble and gratifying, searingly
painful and sorrow
steady
until you tumble, fall from the height of grace
tripped by enemies, loved ones, and sometimes even yourself.

But it's at those moments, face planted to the ground, hands grimy with dust, when you unearth lost treasure.
whether ugly or dazzling, whether grief or relief
you should accept it. pick it up. shove it into your backpack of experience.
prevent someone else from tripping.

Hey, why?

*Why did you say that?
your words, like arrows, digging into my skin
into my Achilles heel
leaving a whitish, prominent scar
that will heal,
skin of love covering bloody tissue,
but never fade.
When will you stop?!
your torrent of words
nonstop.
How did you hurt me?
I thought I could withstand
skin and mind impenetrable from shallow remarks
How did you stab my heart?
Where does our relationship lie?
Warm smiles, kind gestures.
Was it all in vain?*

What did I do wrong?

A Painful Learning Moment

To whom it may concern,

dewy grass and the concrete walkway, bone dry in the early summer's gaze
the only thing I stared at

as that girl stuck her two middle fingers at me.

The ground was littered with candy wrappers, styrofoam trays and mysterious bits of food
the only barrier between her hatred and me.

Turning my head up, I only met her attack with a blank stare: a mixture of mild confusion, but also lost hope.

Maybe people can't change after all.

I put that energy into strolling past her, suppressing my anger. She stuck out her leg.

I tripped

Down.

How?

Down.

Why?

Down to the tan, porous, stepped-upon concrete.

While falling, I saw you.

I saw you in the crowd at the courtyard

gossiping

spreading rumors

teasing

harassing

horseplay

I know you saw the gash on my knee, the glistening drop of blood collecting at my fingertips, specks of concrete
embedded.

I know you felt the agonizing pain, tears, and hopeless fear in my eyes.

I know you could hear the huffing-puffing noise I make when I'm trying not to cry.

I know you saw the psychopathic smile on the girl's face

laughter as she saw me go down

I know you saw me get up and run away.

You didn't speak up. Why?

I still have a whitish, prominent scar

that will heal,

skin of love covering bloody tissue,

but never fade.

The emotional scar left me with trauma, but also a perfect example to showcase the problems of your school.

racist slander and slurs

misogyny and misandry

comparison between wealth and class

The school is bursting with all these horrible attributes, displayed as clearly as the trophies you proudly present in
glass cases.

You first notice them when you walk in, gleaming gold and silver, blinding in the sunlight.

That's the same way racism, sexism, and classism that you've built a tolerance to is wide and clear to any bystander.

It's not right.

You too, were so deep in such a superficial conversation, so focused on tearing others down and building yourself up,
that you failed to notice the real issues.
when blood is drawn and feelings are stabbed
the only thing you do is watch.

I'm now at a different school.
one where people don't mind the color of your skin.
one where people don't mind sparing a quarter to help.
one where people can express their emotions
be authentic
one that isn't afraid of difference.

I now have someone I can talk deeply with, who'll spare me change at the vending machine, who sees race as pride and uniqueness, and cherishes difference. Heck, I now know a lot of people who'll do that.

Promise me, you'll do something next time.

Thank you

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Who knew that day I discovered the most life-changing, gorgeous, and impactful artifact ever:

*What do you do when you're hurt  
stuck somewhere without love  
with different opinions  
philosophies  
and even facts  
wishing for simple kindness  
kindness like freshly baked cookies  
warm, sticky, sweet  
its aroma spreading around the house  
regardless of what's in it  
wishing kindness be spread the same way  
unconditionally  
emerging when you least expect it?*

Find salvation in a house of similar beliefs.

### To Believe

*Inspired by a poem by Jacqueline Woodson called "what i believe" in her book, titled "Brown Girl Dreaming"*

I once believed in perfection.

It consumed me.

Perfection. It's

a chronic disease, with weary eyes, hand cramps

a manifested parasite, shown through a sickly figure, mind deprived from freedom and happiness

a voice that never hushes

*That's not goodbe better.*

body bent over desk, mind delirious from long work hours, crippling stress

all climbing to achieve...

The sweet sensation of a perfect world.

The joy once

I end this

misery.



I will believe in forgiving.

No matter the stinging words said.

No matter the wounds created.

No matter the relationships shattered.

But maybe I should work on forgiving myself too.

I'm believing in enjoying.

Enjoying the moment.

*even if you're making mistakes just before.*

Enjoying the warm embraces and tender kisses.

*even if you're making mistakes that are hurting loved ones.*

Enjoying yourself.

*even if you're making mistakes you hate yourself for.*

Because if you're making mistakes,

*you're making progress.*

*you're making artifacts with answers to unasked and unanswered questions.*

*you're making reminiscent moments.*

*you're making individuality.*

*you're making your future.*